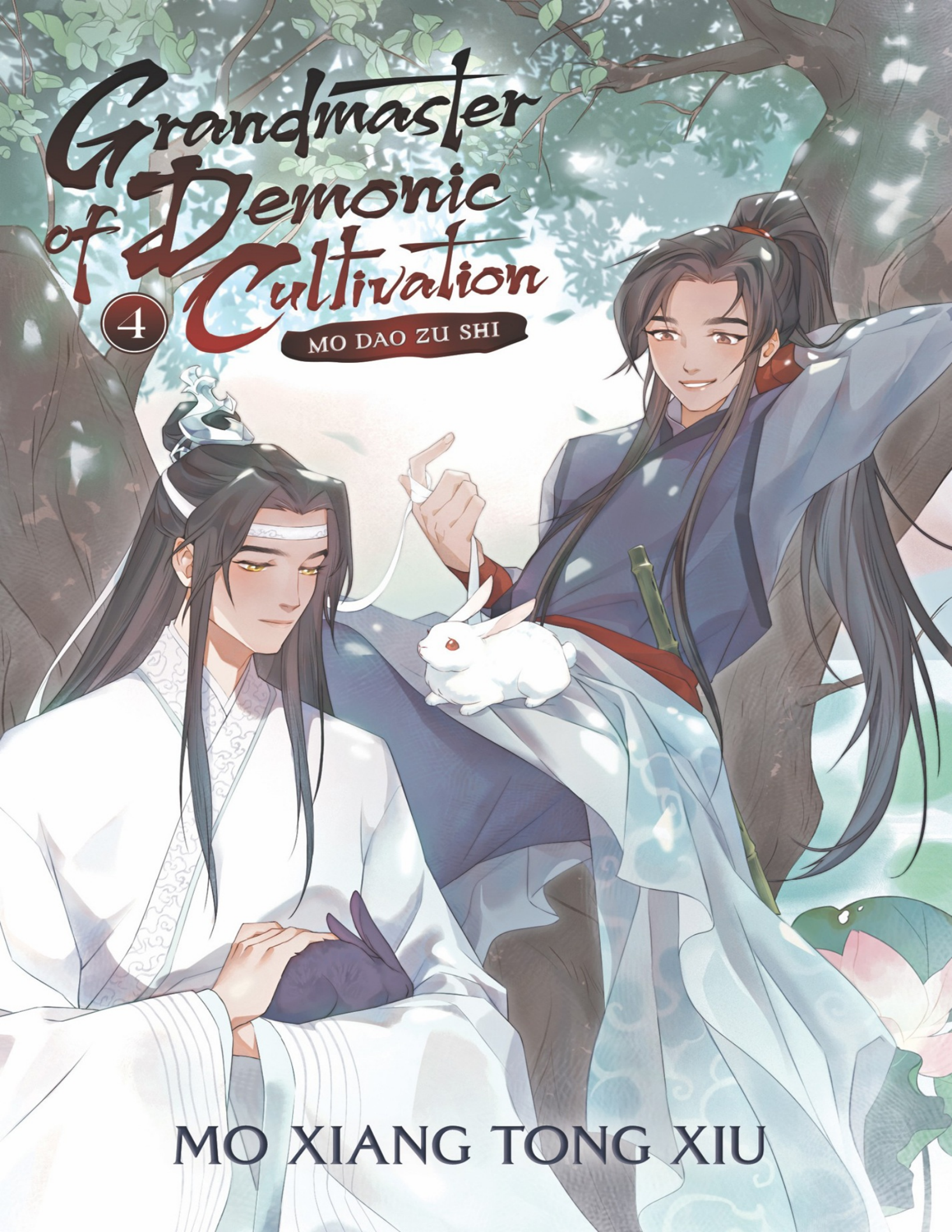

Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation
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MO DAO ZU SHI
MO XIANG TONG XIU

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Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation

MO DAO ZU SHI

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墨香铜臭





Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation

MO DAO ZU SHI

4

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Chapter 16:
The Unruly

— Part 1 —

AT GOLDEN CARP TOWER, Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji strolled side by side through the sea of Sparks Amidst Snow. Lan Xichen's hand idly brushed one of the snow-white flowers, and his touch was so gentle that not a single drop of dew fell from its blooming petals.

"Wangji," he said. "Do you have something on your mind? Why do you look so troubled?"

Though he said Lan Wangji looked troubled, his current expression was no different from normal to the untrained eye.

Lan Wangji furrowed his brow and shook his head. It was a while before he replied, quietly, "Xiongzhang. I want to bring someone back to the Cloud Recesses."

Lan Xichen was astonished. "Bring someone back to the Cloud Recesses?"

Lan Wangji nodded. His thoughts clearly weighed heavily on him. After a brief pause, he added, "Bring him back…and hide him away."

Lan Xichen's eyes widened.

Ever since their mother's passing, his little brother had become progressively more withdrawn. Confined to his room of his own volition, he spent his days reading, meditating, writing, playing the guqin, or cultivating, and would only emerge when summoned for Night Hunts. He disliked conversation as a rule, and no one but Lan Xichen could coax more than a few sentences from him. This was

the first time he'd heard something like this come out of Lan Wangji's mouth.

"Hide him away?" Lan Xichen pressed.

Lan Wangji wrinkled his brow. "But he is unwilling."

At that moment, they heard a commotion ahead.

"Do you think you're allowed to wander around here?" Someone clicked their tongue. "Who gave you permission?!"

"My apologies," a young voice replied. "I…"

Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji both looked up at the sound of that voice and saw two figures standing next to the spirit wall. The one hollering was Jin Zixun, who stood surrounded by an entourage of servants and cultivators. The one being hollered at was a young man dressed in white. When the white-clad young man saw the two Lan brothers, his face went pale and whatever he was going to say was lost. Jin Zixun glared at him with contempt.

With his usual impeccable timing, Jin Guangyao made a sudden appearance to defuse the situation.

"Golden Carp Tower's paths are intricate. It can't be helped that Su-gongzi lost his way." He gestured to the white-clad youth. "Why don't you come with me?"

Jin Zixun snorted when he saw Jin Guangyao pop up. He sidestepped around them and left.

The white-clad youth was taken aback. "You remember me?"

"Of course." Jin Guangyao smiled. "Why would I not? Haven't we met before? And what splendid sword technique Su Minshan-gongzi displayed back then. Ever since the Siege Hunt at Mount Baifeng, I've been fretting over what a shame it would be if a budding talent like yourself never made it to our clan. But here you are! I'm beside myself with joy. Please, won't you come this way?"

Countless cultivators who specialized in the sword threw in their lots with the Jin Clan of Lanling. Su She hadn't thought many

here would know his name. But not only did Jin Guangyao remember him perfectly, despite having only a single, rushed encounter with him—he showered him with praise!

Su She was greatly relieved. He stopped paying attention to the Lan brothers and quickly left with Jin Guangyao, as if afraid they'd approach to mock or criticize him.

After witnessing this scene, Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji took their seats in Pageantry Hall. As a banquet was not a suitable venue to continue their previous conversation, they put that topic aside and Lan Wangji resumed his usual frosty demeanor. The Lan Clan of Gusu was known far and wide for their distaste of alcohol, so there were no wine cups set on their tables, only tea and several smaller dishes of refreshments—all thanks to Jin Guangyao's thoughtful planning. No one approached them to raise a toast either. All was peaceful in their vicinity.

But the peace didn't last long. A man dressed in the Sparks Amidst Snow uniform walked over with a wine cup in each hand and bellowed salutations at them.

"Sect Leader Lan, Hanguang-jun, I raise a toast to you both!"

It was Jin Zixun, who had been stumbling around the hall raising toasts to all present. Jin Guangyao, who knew that Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji did not care for alcohol, hurried over.

"Zixun, Zewu-jun and Hanguang-jun are both from the Cloud Recesses. There are three thousand precepts carved on their Wall of Discipline, as you know. Rather than force them to drink, why not—"

Jin Zixun greatly disapproved of Jin Guangyao. He considered the circumstances of his birth vulgar and thought it shameful that they belonged to the same clan. And so, he cut him off before he could finish speaking. "Our Jin Clan and the Lan Clan are like one family. We're all on the same side. And if my Lan brothers won't drink with me, it means they look down on me!"

Several of his admirers applauded.

"Such forthrightness!"

"Now *that's* how a hero should act!"

Jin Guangyao maintained his smile without flinching but gave a soundless sigh and rubbed his temples. Lan Xichen rose to his feet to decline the toast, but Jin Zixun was unrelenting.

"Don't say anything, Sect Leader Lan. Our families aren't strangers, so don't try and placate me the same way you would an outsider! Give it to me straight—are you gonna drink or not?!"

Jin Guangyao's smiling lips twitched almost to the point of convulsion. He shot an apologetic look at Lan Xichen. "Sect Leader Lan still needs to return home on his sword after this," he said mildly. "Drinking might affect him…"

Jin Zixun completely disregarded this explanation. "What, is he gonna drop after a few cups? I can drink eight huge bowls and still soar around on my sword!"

Whoops and cheers sounded from all around. Lan Wangji remained seated, glaring frigidly at the cup of liquor Jin Zixun had forced in front of him. He appeared to be on the verge of speaking when a hand plucked away the proffered wine cup.

Lan Wangji was briefly startled. Then he looked up, and his knitted brows suddenly relaxed.

The first thing he saw was a black robe. A flute with a tassel as red as blood was tucked into the waistband. Standing with one hand behind his back, the newcomer poured the wine down his throat and showed the empty cup to Jin Zixun.

"I drank it on his behalf. Are you happy now?"

His eyes seemed to smile on his handsome face, and his tone was lilting, even as he stood with straight-backed confidence.

"Wei-gongzi?" Lan Xichen said in surprise.

"When did he get here?!" someone exclaimed in a hushed whisper.

Wei Wuxian put down the wine cup and tugged his collar back into place. “Just now.”

Just now? But no one had announced his arrival, nor greeted him. How had he gotten inside Pageantry Hall so stealthily, without anyone noticing? The crowd shuddered violently despite themselves, but Jin Guangyao recovered quickly and remained as enthusiastic as ever.

“I did not know Wei-gongzi had arrived at Golden Carp Tower. I apologize for the lack of welcome. Do you require a seat? Oh yes, might you have an invitation?”

Wei Wuxian didn’t bother with the pleasantries but cut straight to the point. “No need, and I don’t.” He nodded at Jin Zixun. “Jin-gongzi, might I have a word?”

“If you’ve got something to say to me, come back after my family’s banquet is over,” Jin Zixun said.

It was obvious to Wei Wuxian that he had no intention of actually talking to him. “How long will I have to wait?”

“Maybe six or eight hours. Or maybe ten or twelve. Who knows? Maybe tomorrow.”

“I’m afraid I can’t wait that long.”

“You’re gonna have to, whether you like it or not,” Jin Zixun said haughtily.

“And what might Wei-gongzi want Zixun for?” asked Jin Guangyao. “Is it very urgent?”

“Incredibly so,” Wei Wuxian said. “Not a minute is to be lost.”

Jin Zixun turned to Lan Xichen and raised the other cup in his hand. “Sect Leader Lan, come, come, come! You haven’t drunk yours yet!”

Seeing him purposely stalling, a shadow passed over Wei Wuxian’s face. He narrowed his eyes and smirked. “Fine. Then I’ll

ask you about it right here—Jin-gongzi, do you know someone named Wen Ning?"

"Wen Ning?" Jin Zixun repeated the name. "No."

"I'm sure you do," Wei Wuxian said. "Last month, you were Night Hunting in the Ganquan area. While chasing an eight-winged bat, you entered the settlement of the Wen Clan's surviving members—or rather, the area where they're being detained. You captured a group of Wen sect disciples. He was their leader."

After the Sunshot Campaign, the Wen Clan of Qishan had been completely destroyed. The territory they'd expanded into had been divided among the rest of the clans, and Ganquan was presently under the banner of the Jin Clan of Lanling. The Wen Clan now occupied less than a thousandth of the land they'd once held—they had been driven to a corner of Qishan, and there they cowered, hanging on by a thread.

"If I don't remember, I don't remember," Jin Zixun said. "I don't have enough free time to waste on remembering the name of some Wen dog."

"Fine. I don't mind going into the details," Wei Wuxian said. "Some Wen disciples were out investigating a disturbance when they ran into the Bat King you were unable to catch. You forced them to wear a Spirit-Attraction Flag and serve as bait. They were scared to obey, and one of them came forward to try and reason with you. That's the Wen Ning I'm talking about; he stutters when he speaks. While everyone was dilly-dallying around, the Bat King escaped. You beat the Wen cultivators severely and then took them away by force. Their current whereabouts are unknown; they have yet to return. Need I say more? I just really don't know who to ask besides you, ya know?"

"Wei Wuxian, what are you getting at? Why are you asking me about them?" Jin Zixun demanded. "You're not thinking of sticking up for those Wen dogs, are you?"

Wei Wuxian smiled innocently. "What do *you* care if I want to stick up for them or stick their heads on pikes? Hand them over!"

The smile on his face abruptly vanished as he spoke that last phrase, and his voice grew cold. He had obviously lost his patience. Many within Pageantry Hall shivered. Jin Zixun felt chills as well, but his fury immediately resurged.

"Wei Wuxian, what arrogance!" he shouted. "Did the Jin Clan of Lanling invite you today? To think you'd dare stand here and act so impudently! Do you really think you're invincible? That no one would dare incur your wrath? You want to topple the heavens?"

Wei Wuxian laughed. "You're comparing *yourself* to the heavens? Pardon my bluntness, but that's a pretty swollen head you got there."

While Jin Zixun did indeed privately consider the Jin Clan of Lanling the new authority of the cultivation world, he knew he had misstepped by saying it aloud. His cheeks reddened, but just as he was about to rebuke Wei Wuxian for all to hear, Jin Guangshan spoke up from the head seat.

"Gentlemen, why take such offense over such trifles?" He chuckled amiably. "But Wei-gongzi, allow me to make a fair point—it is truly not appropriate for you to intrude on the Jin Clan's private banquet."

It was impossible that Jin Guangshan did not care about what had transpired at the Siege Hunt on Mount Baifeng. That was why he had simply smiled and watched Jin Zixun mock Wei Wuxian without stopping him, only stepping in when Jin Zixun was losing the upper hand.

Wei Wuxian bowed his head. "Sect Leader Jin, causing a disturbance at your private banquet was not my intention. I apologize for the offense. However, the people Jin-gongzi abducted are nowhere to be found. We can't even confirm whether they're alive or dead. If we delay any further, it will be too late to save them. I owe my life to one of them, so I cannot stand by and do

nothing. I do not expect magnanimity; I will simply ask for forgiveness."

"What matter could be so important that it cannot be set aside for the moment?" Jin Guangshan asked. "Come, come. Have a seat. We can chat."

Jin Guangyao had already silently gotten a seat ready for him.

"That's very kind of Sect Leader Jin, but I must decline," Wei Wuxian replied. "This matter cannot be prolonged. Please resolve it as soon as possible."

"It cannot be rushed," Jin Guangshan said. "If we must continue to squabble, I will note that we also have a number of unresolved issues that cannot wait. Since you've come calling, let's take this chance to sort everything out. What do you think?"

Wei Wuxian raised his brows. "What 'unresolved issues'?"

"Wei-gongzi, we've mentioned this to you a few times. You've not forgotten, have you…?" Jin Guangshan asked. "During the Sunshot Campaign, you used a certain device."

"Oh, you did mention that thing earlier. The Yin Tiger Tally. What of it?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Rumor has it that you forged the Yin Tiger Tally with the spirit of an iron sword you found inside the cave of the Xuanwu of Slaughter," Jin Guangshan said. "You used the device once on the battlefield. It possessed terrible power, and even affected some of our own cultivator peers—"

Wei Wuxian cut him off. "Get to the point."

"That *is* the point," Jin Guangshan said. "That battle didn't just result in Wen Clan casualties but also casualties on our own side. I am of the opinion that the spiritual weapon in question is demonstrably difficult to control. And so for a single person to maintain sole ownership of it, I'm afraid…"

He hadn't finished when Wei Wuxian started laughing.

When he was done with his fit of laughter, he said, "Sect Leader Jin. Please allow me to ask you one question. With the Wen Clan of Qishan gone, do you think that the Jin Clan of Lanling should take their place?"

Only crickets could be heard within Pageantry Hall.

"Every spiritual device has to be handed over to you, everyone has to take orders from you. The way the Jin Clan of Lanling is acting—one might almost think the Wens were still in power," Wei Wuxian added.

At his words, a sliver of rage borne of shame flashed across Jin Guangshan's square face. After the Sunshot Campaign, veiled criticism of Wei Wuxian and his demonic cultivation had begun to surface within prominent clans. Bringing up the Yin Tiger Tally was his attempt to threaten Wei Wuxian and remind him that they held certain things over his head. To remind him that everyone was watching, and that he should not be so arrogant, nor consider scorning the command of the Jin Clan. Who would've thought Wei Wuxian would still speak so bluntly and brutally to him? Jin Guangshan did secretly consider himself the successor to the Wen Clan's power, but no one had ever dared accuse him of it so openly—and to mock the idea, as an added insult.

To his right, a guest cultivator barked, "Wei Wuxian! Mind your tongue!"

"Am I mistaken? Wei Wuxian asked. "Forcing living people to serve as bait, beating them at any sign of disobedience—how is that different from the behavior of the Wen Clan of Qishan?"

Another guest cultivator stood up. "Of course it's different. The Wen dogs committed all manner of evil deeds. They deserved to fall in such disgrace. All we're doing is retaliating in kind, an eye for an eye. Giving them a taste of their own medicine. Where's the fault in that?"

"Bite the ones that bit you," Wei Wuxian said. "But Wen Ning's branch of the family was never stained with innocent blood. Are you

just punishing them by association?"

"Wei-gongzi, you say that, but are their hands *really* clean?" someone reasoned. "That's only one side of the story, based on your word alone. Where's the proof?"

"Isn't your claim that they killed innocents also a one-sided story?" Wei Wuxian countered. "Shouldn't *you* show proof first? Why are you asking me?"

The one who had spoken shook his head back and forth, clearly thinking Wei Wuxian was being unreasonable. Another person in attendance sneered.

"When the Wen Clan slaughtered our people, they were a thousand times crueler! They didn't treat us justly then, so why should we consider justice now?"

Wei Wuxian laughed. "Oh, I see. Because the Wen dogs committed so many evil deeds, everyone with the surname of Wen can be killed without exception—do I understand you right? Many renegade clans from Qishan surrendered and joined the alliance, and they've since found support with the Jin Clan of Lanling. If I'm not mistaken, I see a few guests at this very banquet who used to be the family heads of clans affiliated with the Wen Clan."

The faces of the family heads in question instantly fell.

"It seems that our anger can be vented at will on anyone surnamed Wen, regardless of their innocence. Does that mean it's okay if I go kill them all right now?" Wei Wuxian continued.

As he spoke, he pressed his hand to Chenqing, which was tucked into his waistband. In that instant, everyone at the banquet was struck by the memory of that dark day. It was as if they had returned to the battlefield where bodies piled as high as mountains and blood flowed as deep as the sea. They all shot to their feet.

"Wei Ying!" Lan Wangji exclaimed darkly.

Jin Guangyao was standing closest to Wei Wuxian, but his expression didn't change. "Wei-gongzi, please don't do anything

rash," he beseeched, his tone still mild. "We can talk things through in a civil manner."

Jin Guangshan had risen to his feet as well, his face etched with shock, rage, fear, and hate. "Wei Wuxian! You're just running riot because Jiang…because Sect Leader Jiang isn't here!"

"Do you think I wouldn't run riot even if he *was* here?" Wei Wuxian shot back. "If I want to kill anyone, who can stop me? Who *dares* to stop me?!"

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said. He stated each word clearly. "Lower Chenqing."

Wei Wuxian shot him a look and saw his own half-savage reflection in those eyes as light as tinted glass. He abruptly twisted his gaze away and shouted, "Jin Zixun!"

"Zixun!" Jin Guangshan hurriedly called out as well.

"Enough with this crap," Wei Wuxian said. "I'm sure everyone here knows my patience is limited. I've wasted enough time on you. Where are they? I'm going to count to three. One!"

Jin Zixun wanted to grit his teeth and tough this out, but his blood ran cold at the sight of Jin Guangshan's expression.

"*Two!*" Wei Wuxian continued.

"…Fine! Fine!" Jin Zixun yelled. "It's only some Wen dogs. If you want to make them your lackeys, take them. I don't feel like dealing with you today! Go look for them at Qiongqi Path!"

Wei Wuxian snorted. "Well, now. That wasn't so hard, was it?"

He had come as swiftly as the wind, and now he left in the same manner. The guests' gloom finally dispersed as soon as he disappeared. Those who had sprung to their feet returned to their seats within the banquet hall. All were drenched in cold sweat. Meanwhile, Jin Guangshan sat in the head seat, still in a stupor. Moments later, he suddenly flew into a rage and toppled the small table in front of him with a kick. It rolled down the steps, scattering the gold and silver flatware.

Noticing that he'd lost his composure, Jin Guangyao tried to smooth over the situation. "Fa…"

Before he could finish, Jin Guangshan left the hall in a furious whirl of tossed sleeves. Jin Zixun felt he had lost face by yielding to Wei Wuxian. Consumed by fury and hate, he moved to leave the banquet as well.

"Zixun…" Jin Guangyao hurriedly called after him.

Lost in the throes of anger, Jin Zixun hurled aside the cup of wine he had yet to hand over. It hit Jin Guangyao squarely in his chest, and spilled liquor blossomed over the brilliant Sparks Amidst Snow embroidered on his snow-white robe. Everyone at the banquet was too distracted by the chaos to pay any mind to his embarrassment, and this act of great rudeness went ignored by most.

Lan Xichen was the only exception. "San-di!" he exclaimed.

"It's fine, it's fine, it's fine," Jin Guangyao said quickly. "Stay seated, er-ge."

It was inappropriate for Lan Xichen to comment on Jin Zixun's behavior, so all he could do was hand Jin Guangyao a white handkerchief. "Why don't you go change clothes?"

Jin Guangyao took the handkerchief and wiped himself down with a wry smile. "But I can't leave."

He was the only one at the venue who could clean up this mess, so how could he possibly pull himself away? He placated the crowd while sighing, as if his was a sorry plight.

"Wei-gongzi really is much too rash. How can he talk like that, in front of so many clans?"

"Was he wrong?" Lan Wangji questioned coldly.

Jin Guangyao was stunned, but only for a barely noticeable moment, before he quickly smiled. "Ha ha. Right. He was right. But it's precisely because he was right that he can't say such things to their faces."

"Wei-gongzi's temperament has changed drastically," Lan Xichen mused.

Upon hearing this, a trace of pain flashed in Lan Wangji's light eyes and across his tightly furrowed brow.

After descending Golden Carp Tower, Wei Wuxian walked through the city of Lanling, twisting and turning down its many roads. He turned several street corners before entering a small alleyway.

"Found them. Let's go," he said.

Wen Qing had been waiting for a long time in the alley, so nervous she was unable to sit or stand still. She charged out the moment she heard him, but in her weakened state, the sudden motion made her dizzy and she tripped. Wei Wuxian caught her with a single hand.

"Do you want me to find you a place to rest?" he suggested. "I can go alone. I'm more than enough. I'll definitely bring Wen Ning back."

Wen Qing clutched at him. "No! No! I have to go. I must go!"

After Wen Ning had gone missing, she'd run practically nonstop all the way from Qishan to Yunmeng on her own two legs. She hadn't slept for days, and when she found Wei Wuxian, she'd urged and begged and pleaded like she'd gone mad. Right now, she barely looked human—her lips were too pale and her eyes open too wide.

Seeing that she was on the verge of collapse, but knowing they didn't have time for her to stop to eat, Wei Wuxian bought her some doughy white steamed buns from a street vendor. Wen Qing knew she was almost at her limit and that she needed food. She tore into the buns with her teeth, her hair a disheveled mess and her eyes bloodshot. Her appearance reminded Wei Wuxian of himself, back when he and Jiang Cheng were on the run.

"Everything will be all right," he vowed again. "I'll definitely bring Wen Ning back."

Wen Qing sobbed as she ate. "I knew I shouldn't have left… but I had no choice. They transferred me to a different city by force. By the time I got back, Wen Ning was gone, and so was everyone else! I just knew he couldn't handle things alone!"

"He can," Wei Wuxian assured.

"But he can't!" Wen Qing broke down. "A-Ning has always been skittish, ever since he was young. He's timid and scared of getting into trouble. He didn't dare recruit any subordinates who had even the slightest temper. They were all yes-men, just like him! If he ever ran into trouble without me, he wouldn't know what to do!"

When Wei Wuxian had bid her farewell, carrying Jiang Cheng on his back, Wen Qing had told him this: *"No matter how this war ends, we do not owe each other anything from now on. Our debts are cleared."* Her haughtiness was clear as day in his memory. But last night, she had clutched his hand in a death grip and almost dropped to her knees as she pleaded.

"Wei Wuxian…Wei Wuxian…Wei-gongzi. Please help me. I have no one else to turn to. You have to help me save A-Ning! I really have no one else, I can only come to you!"

All that pride—all gone.

Qiongqi Path was an old road running through a valley between mountains. According to legend, it was the place where the founder of the Wen Clan of Qishan, Wen Mao, gained fame in the span of a single battle. Centuries ago, Wen Mao had been locked in a fierce battle with a terrible monster for eighty-one days before he finally slew it. This creature was called the qiongqi, a chaotic and ancient beast of great evil. It punished the righteous, praised the wicked, and took great pleasure in eating those who were just and loyal. It was considered the divine beast of all evildoers. Of course, there was no way to judge the accuracy of the legend or to

determine if it was simply a boastful exaggeration passed around by the descendants of the Wen Clan of Qishan.

Over the passage of centuries, the valley had transformed from a perilous yet important passageway into a tourist attraction, a place where past accomplishments were praised and remembered. After the Sunshot Campaign, the clans had divided up the land that belonged to the Wen Clan of Qishan, and Qiongqi Path had been stuffed into the pockets of the Jin Clan of Lanling. The vast mountain bluffs that towered over the path on either side had originally been decorated with carvings depicting the life of the great ancestor Wen Mao. But of course, once the Jin Clan of Lanling took over, the glorious past tales of the Wen Clan could not be allowed to remain. They set out to reconstruct the place—meaning to erase all the reliefs from both cliffs, cleaning them away entirely to make room for new carvings. And above all, they had to come up with a new name that would immortalize the extraordinary bravery of the Jin Clan.

The project required a significant amount of labor, but they had a most suitable supply of workers—the captive survivors of the Wen Clan, who had been reduced to a pack of stray dogs after the conclusion of the Sunshot Campaign.

It was night by the time they arrived at Qiongqi Path. Thin threads of cold rain fell from the darkened sky. Wen Qing hobbled closely behind Wei Wuxian, shivering as though racked by chills that emanated from within. From time to time, Wei Wuxian had to help her along in order to keep them moving.

A row of makeshift shacks lined the front of the valley, serving as housing for the captives to rest at night. In the distance, Wei Wuxian and Wen Qing saw a hunchbacked figure trudging along, carrying a large flag and being steadily battered by the pouring rain. As they approached, they saw the flag-bearer was a tottering old granny carrying a toddler. The child was tied to the old woman’s back, very focused on chewing his finger. The two of them, old and young, were walking back and forth on the road. The old woman

was having a very hard time carrying the flag and had to pause and set it down every two steps. Wen Qing's eyes reddened at the sight.

"Granny! It's me!" she cried.

The old woman probably had poor eyesight and was equally hard of hearing. She couldn't see or hear exactly who they were but could only tell that someone was approaching and yelling something. Stricken with fear, she quickly hauled the flag up again, as if terrified she would be discovered and horribly reprimanded.

Wen Qing ran over and snatched the flag from her. "What is this? What are you doing?!"

The huge flag was emblazoned with an enormous Wen Clan insignia, but a giant blood-red X had been painted over it. The flag itself had also been deliberately shredded.

Ever since the conclusion of the Sunshot Campaign, countless people had been labeled "stray Wen dogs." The ways in which they were tormented by the masses were also countless, all carried out under the righteous excuse of "encouraging self-reflection." Wei Wuxian knew this old woman was too frail to be forced into manual labor like the rest, so the overseers had cooked up this plan to humiliate her—forcing her to walk around all day with a tattered Wen flag raised high.

At first, the old woman shrank back. When she finally recognized the person before her, her jaw dropped.

"Granny, where's A-Ning?" Wen Qing asked. "Where are Si-shu[1] and the others? Where's A-Ning?!"

The old woman glanced at Wei Wuxian, who stood behind Wen Qing. She didn't dare answer aloud but only stared in the direction of the valley. Abandoning all care for anything else, Wen Qing dashed off in that direction.

Torches lined both sides of the spacious valley, and the flames slightly flickered under the drizzling rain. But their fire still blazed

bright, illuminating the whole of the mountain path—including the hundreds of figures carrying heavy loads.

The faces of the captives were sickly pale, and their steps were sluggish. They were not permitted to employ any spiritual power or outside help in their toils. This was not only a safeguard against retaliation but also another form of punishment. Over a dozen overseers from the Jin Clan of Lanling wandered through the crowd on horseback, berating the workers from beneath their black umbrellas.

Wen Qing charged out into the rain-soaked valley. Her wild eyes swept over each despondent and tired face. One of the overseers noticed her and barked a question at her with one hand raised.

"Where'd you come from? Who let you trespass in here?!"

"I'm looking for someone. Please, I'm looking for someone!" Wen Qing pleaded anxiously.

The overseer rode over on horseback, pulling something from his waistband and waving it in the air. "I don't care if you are, get outta here! If you don't…"

When he saw the man in black robes who was behind the young woman, he stopped abruptly, suddenly tongue-tied.

The young man had a bright and handsome face, but his eyes were cold, and his stare made the overseer shudder unconsciously. The overseer quickly realized the young man wasn't staring at him but rather at the iron branding rod he was waving.

The overseers' iron branding rods were exactly the same as the ones once wielded by the Wen Clan's servants—exactly the same, except the design of the brand had been changed from a sun to a peony.

A chilling glint flashed in Wei Wuxian's eyes when he noticed. Quite a few of the overseers recognized his face, and despite themselves, silently pulled their horses back and began whispering

to each other. No one dared to stop Wen Qing as she shouted and searched the crowd.

"A-Ning! A-Ning!"

Her cries were sad and shrill and went unanswered. She searched the entire valley but found no trace of her younger brother. If Wen Ning truly had been present, he would've long since hurried to her side. The overseers quietly dismounted and peered hard at Wei Wuxian, seeming hesitant about whether to greet him.

Wen Qing tackled them with questions. "Where are the Wen cultivators that were brought in a few days ago?"

The men exchanged dismayed looks and dawdled in their answers. One of the overseers, who seemed quite good-natured, responded amiably. "Every captive here is a Wen cultivator. New ones are sent over every day."

"He's my little brother, Jin Zixun brought him here!" Wen Qing frantically explained. "He…he's about this tall. He doesn't really talk, and when he does, he stutters…"

"Come now, miss. Look around," said the good-natured overseer. "There are so many people here, how could we possibly remember whether any of them stutter?"

In her distress, Wen Qing could not help but stamp her foot. "I know he's here for sure!"

The good-natured overseer was round and chubby. He smiled apologetically. "Don't fret, miss. To be honest, representatives from various clans often come around to ask for cultivators. Maybe he was taken by one of them? When we do roll calls, we also sometimes discover there's been a runaway."

"He wouldn't have run away!" Wen Qing insisted. "Granny and the others are all here. My little brother wouldn't have run away on his own."

"Why don't you look around for him, then? Take your time," the good-natured overseer said. "Everyone we have is here. If you

can’t find him in this valley, then I don’t know what else to tell ya.”

Wei Wuxian suddenly spoke up. “*Everyone* is here?”

The moment he spoke, the overseers’ faces stiffened. The good-natured overseer turned to him and replied, “Yeah.”

“All right,” Wei Wuxian said. “I’ll grant you that the *living* are here, at least. So what about the rest?”

Wen Qing swayed on her feet.

The opposite of living was, naturally, dead.

“Don’t say that, sir,” the good-natured overseer said hastily. “Even though it’s only Wen cultivators here, no one would dare take a life…”

As if he hadn’t heard him, Wei Wuxian retrieved the flute at his waist. The captives who had been arduously trudging along suddenly shouted at the sight, threw off the burdens on their backs, and fled. The crowd milling around Wei Wuxian rapidly cleared, and he was left alone at the center of an empty circle.

The captives hadn’t recognized Wei Wuxian by his face alone. After all, there was only one outcome for Wen cultivators who encountered Wei Wuxian on the battlefield during the Sunshot Campaign—complete annihilation. Most of the Wen cultivators who *did* see his face quickly became fierce corpses themselves, bound under his control. It was instead the red-tasseled black wooden flute which haunted their nightmares, and the tales of the black-clad youth who controlled it. There were cries of alarm from all around.

“The hell-flute Chenqing!”

Wei Wuxian raised Chenqing to his lips. The shrill sound of the flute pierced the night sky like an arrow, slashing through the rain and echoing through the entire valley. After only one note, Wei Wuxian tucked Chenqing away and dropped his hands. A smirk lingered on his lips as he let the rain soak his black hair and black robes.

Not long after, someone asked, “What’s that noise?”

Shrieks of alarm suddenly sounded from the back of the crowd, and the circle began to break apart as people stumbled and hurried away. Amidst the drizzling rain, dozens of figures stood unsteadily in the spot where the crowd had once been. They wore ragged clothing. They were tall and short, men and women. Some emitted the putrid smell of rot.

At the head of the group stood Wen Ning, his eyes still wide open.[2]

His face was as ghastly pale as candle wax. His pupils were blown huge and black, and the blood at the corners of his mouth had already congealed to a dark brown. Even though his chest did not move with any breath, it was obvious that one side of his rib cage had been violently caved in.

No one who saw him could possibly have thought he was still alive. But Wen Qing still wouldn't give up. Trembling, she grabbed his wrist to feel for his pulse. After gripping it for a moment, she burst into tears with a loud wail.

Over the past few days, she'd been frightened. She'd been terrified. She'd run so hard and for so long she'd almost gone mad, but she was still too late. She hadn't even had a chance to see her little brother breathe his last.

Wen Qing sobbed as she felt around Wen Ning's ribs—as if she was trying to reconnect them, as if she had deluded herself into thinking there was a slim chance she could restore him to life. Her sweet face was contorted by weeping, rendering her ugly and unsightly. But when it came to the truly brokenhearted, there was no beauty in tears.

Confronted with the dead body of her only sibling, not a single shred of her pride remained.

It was too great a blow. Unable to hold on any longer, Wen Qing fainted. Wei Wuxian, standing behind her, caught her limp form without comment and let her lean against his chest.

He closed his eyes. A brief moment passed before he opened them again.

"Who killed him?"

His tone was temperate—as if he wasn't enraged but only thinking aloud. The chief overseer, thinking this a fortunate development, refused to admit any fault.

"Wei-gongzi, please don't speak so irresponsibly. No one here would dare kill another human being so lightly. He was the one who didn't take care while working and rolled down the cliff to his death."

"'No one here would dare kill another human being so lightly,'" Wei Wuxian parroted. "Is that true?"

The overseers all swore solemnly that it was.

"Absolutely true!"

"No word of a lie!"

Wei Wuxian flashed a small smile. "I see. I get it."

Then he languidly continued, "It's because they're Wen dogs, and Wen dogs aren't human. So killing them doesn't count—that's what you all meant, right?"

The chief overseer had indeed been thinking exactly that. He paled at being seen through so quickly.

"Or did you really think that *I* wouldn't be able to tell how someone died?" Wei Wuxian continued.

The overseers fell silent. It was finally dawning on them that things were going south, and they were beginning to think of backing away. Wei Wuxian maintained his smile.

"At this point, you'd better just tell the truth. Who killed him? Step forward on your own, or I'll have no choice but to kill everyone here. I'd rather kill someone by mistake than let the culprit off the hook. No fish will slip through the net if you're all dead."

Fear seized everyone present, and chills ran down their spines.

"The Jiang Clan of Yunmeng and the Jin Clan of Lanling are on friendly terms right now," the chief overseer mumbled. "Sir, you can't…"

Wei Wuxian shot him a look. "You're very brave," he said, feigning shock. "Are you threatening me?"

The chief overseer hastily denied the idea. "No, no, of course not."

"Congratulations. You have successfully exhausted my patience," Wei Wuxian said. "Since none of you will tell me, let's hear *his* answer."

As if he had been waiting for this moment, Wen Ning's stiffened corpse suddenly jerked, and he raised his head. The two overseers standing closest to him didn't even get the chance to scream before their throats were seized by a pair of hands as strong as iron bands.

His face expressionless, Wen Ning raised the two short overseers high into the air. The crowd was pulling further and further away, and the empty circle surrounding Wei Wuxian in the clearing yawned wider.

"Wei-gongzi! Wei-gongzi!" the chief overseer cried. "Have mercy! Sir, your impulsive actions will have irreversible consequences!"

The rain was coming down harder and harder. The drops flowed unceasingly down the contours of Wei Wuxian's cheekbones and dripped from his chin.

He whirled around and placed his hand on Wen Ning's shoulder.

"Wen Qionglin!" he shouted.

As if in answer, Wen Ning let out a long, deafening roar. The ears of the onlookers throbbed with dull stabs of pain.

Wei Wuxian gave his order slowly and clearly.

"Make everyone who did this to you suffer the exact same fate. I give you permission to repay them in kind!"

Wen Ning immediately bashed the two overseers in his grip against each other. Their heads burst like watermelons. Red and white exploded through the sky with a loud *bang*, as if celestial maidens were scattering blossoms in the air.

The scene was gory beyond belief. Screams resounded across the valley, horses whinnied, and captives scampered. It was pure mayhem. Wei Wuxian picked up Wen Qing and nonchalantly carried her through the uproar like nothing was wrong. He took the reins of a horse, but just as he was about to turn around, a scrawny captive called out to him.

"…Wei-xiansheng!"

Wei Wuxian turned his head. "What?"

The captive pointed in a certain direction and spoke with a quivering voice. "Th-there's a house at that end of the valley. It's where they…lock people up and beat them. The ones who die are dragged outside and buried. Maybe some of the people you're looking for are there…"

"Thank you," Wei Wuxian said.

He headed in that direction, and sure enough, found a makeshift shack. Still carrying Wen Qing, he kicked the door open. Inside, about a dozen people sat in a corner. Each of them had been badly battered, and their faces were mottled with blue and purple. Startled by his crude kick to the door, they sprang to their feet. When they saw Wen Qing in Wei Wuxian's arms, they stopped caring about their injuries and flung themselves toward him.

"Miss Qing!"

One of the captives addressed Wei Wuxian, sounding furious. "You… Who are you? What have you done to the Chief Officer?"

"Nothing," Wei Wuxian replied. "Which of you are the cultivators serving under Wen Ning? Enough talk—come out!"

The group exchanged looks of dismay, but Wei Wuxian had already left, still carrying Wen Qing. They had no choice but to persevere and follow him, helping each other along. As soon as they left the shack, Wei Wuxian shouted orders to them before they could see what the chaos in the valley was about.

"Everyone find a horse. Hurry!"

A middle-aged man began to protest. "No, our Wen Ning-gongzi…"

He was interrupted by a severed head being hurled past him. The group looked toward it in unison, just in time to see Wen Ning slam a headless body to the ground. Its limbs were still convulsing. He was about to disembowel the man with his bare hands when Wei Wuxian barked another order.

"Enough!"

A growl erupted from Wen Ning's throat. It seemed he was yet unsatisfied. Wei Wuxian blew a short whistle, then ordered again, *"Up!"*

Wen Ning had no choice but to stand.

"What're you waiting around for?" Wei Wuxian yelled. "Get on the horses! Or are you waiting for me to find some swords for you to fly on?!"

Someone remembered there was an elderly woman in their number and hurriedly led both her and the child over to help them mount a horse. Wei Wuxian also hopped onto a horse, still carrying the unconscious Wen Qing. There were only a dozen horses to share, but many dozens of people, so they rode crowded two or three to a horse.

The old woman couldn't ride alone and had the child to hold onto, as well. Seeing them struggle, Wei Wuxian extended his hand.

"Give him to me."

But the old woman just kept shaking her head, and the child clung tightly to her neck. Although they were both almost slipping

off the horse, there was unconcealable terror in both of their eyes. Wei Wuxian swiftly reached out, picked up the child, and tucked him under his arm.

The old woman was horrified. “A-Yuan! A-Yuan!” she cried.

While the child named A-Yuan was still very young, he already knew that he should be scared. But he didn’t cry—he only vigorously chewed on his finger and snuck glimpses at Wei Wuxian.

“Move out!” Wei Wuxian barked.

With a flex of his calves, he set off first. The rest of the captives followed closely behind on horseback, and they all galloped away into the rainy night.

— Part 2 —

A WAVE OF SENSATIONAL gossip swept across the cultivation world that very night.

Come midnight, nearly fifty family heads representing clans both large and small were seated inside Touchstone Pavilion at Golden Carp Tower. The head seat was occupied by Jin Guangshan. Jin Zixuan was away, and Jin Zixun didn't have the necessary qualifications, so only Jin Guangyao stood beside the head seat with his hands at his sides. The first row consisted of family heads and renowned highly ranked cultivators such as Nie Mingjue, Jiang Cheng, Lan Xichen, and Lan Wangji. Their expressions were solemn. The row behind them consisted of lower-ranked family heads and cultivators. Everyone looked like they were preparing to meet a great foe.

Every so often, whispers could be heard.

"I just knew it."

"This was going to happen sooner or later."

"Let's see how this ends."

Jiang Cheng was the center of everyone's attention. He sat in the front row with gloom clouding his face, and just like the rest, he was listening to Jin Guangyao speak. The man's voice was respectful and cautious, but still gentle and sincere.

"…Four overseers were killed during this incident. Around fifty of the surviving Wen Clan members escaped. After Wei Wuxian led them to the Burial Mounds, he summoned hundreds of fierce corpses to patrol and barricade the bottom of the mountain. Currently, our people cannot take a single step past its boundaries."

Once his report concluded, silence reigned inside Touchstone Pavilion.

It was a moment before Jiang Cheng spoke. "He has certainly acted out of line. I apologize to Sect Leader Jin on his behalf. Please do not hesitate to let me know of any way I can remedy the situation, and I will surely do my utmost to compensate."

But what Jin Guangshan wanted wasn't his apology or compensation.

"Sect Leader Jiang," he began. "It goes without saying that, for your sake, the Jin Clan of Lanling would normally never say another word on the subject. But not all the overseers were from the Jin Clan. There were others involved, so…"

Jiang Cheng deeply furrowed his brow and rubbed his temple, which never stopped throbbing. He drew a soundless breath. "…My apologies to the Sect Leaders. You see, the Wen cultivator that Wei Wuxian wanted to save was named Wen Ning. He and his sister Wen Qing showed the two of us mercy during the Sunshot Campaign. That is why…"

"Showed mercy how?" Nie Mingjue demanded. "Wasn't the Wen Clan of Qishan the culprit behind the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng's annihilation?"

Jiang Cheng had constantly worked into the wee hours of the morning, these past few years. He had been on the verge of being able to retire early today when the news had hit him like a thunderbolt, jolting him from his rest and forcing him to rush to Golden Carp Tower overnight. He was competitive by nature and now irritable from fatigue. From the moment he arrived, he had seethed with annoyance that he was going to have to bow his head in apology. Now that Nie Mingjue had brought up the case of his clan's annihilation, hatred sprang up within him unbidden.

That hatred was directed at everyone present—but it was also directed at Wei Wuxian.

After some thought, Lan Xichen answered. "I know a little about Wen Qing. There has never been talk of her being involved in any of the massacres associated with the Sunshot Campaign."

"But she also never *stopped* any of them," Nie Mingjue pointed out.

"How could she have done so, when she was one of Wen Ruohan's trusted aides?" Lan Xichen asked.

Nie Mingjue was indifferent to such logic. "She remained silent and raised no objections while the Wen Clan committed atrocities. That is no different from watching from the sidelines. She can't presume to enjoy preferential treatment when the Wens were fanning the flames of disorder, then refuse to bear the bitter consequences and pay the price when they were overthrown."

Lan Xichen fell silent. He knew that Nie Mingjue despised the Wen dogs the most keenly of everyone present, due to the grudge held by his clan. He was also the sort of man who would never turn a blind eye to such unethical behavior.

One of the family heads spoke up. "Sect Leader Nie is right. Besides, since Wen Qing was Wen Ruohan's trusted aide, I refuse to believe she *never* participated. Who among the Wen dogs doesn't have blood on their hands? Maybe we just haven't found out yet!"

Mention of the Wen Clan's past crimes immediately ignited the crowd and set emotions running high. Jin Guangshan was going to speak at first, but the sight of the commotion made him frown. Observing his expression, Jin Guangyao quickly raised his voice to address the crowd.

"Please settle down, everyone. That is not the focus of our discussion today."

As he spoke, he had the servants bring around frozen sliced fruits to draw the guests' attention. Only then did Touchstone Pavilion gradually quiet down. Jin Guangshan quickly took the chance to speak.

"Sect Leader Jiang, these are the affairs of your own clan. It is not my place to interfere. But at this point, I must remind you of something regarding Wei Ying."

"Please speak, Sect Leader Jin," Jiang Cheng said.

"Sect Leader Jiang, Wei Ying is both your left and right hand. You regard him highly, this we know," Jin Guangshan began. "But it's difficult to say whether he respects *you*, the family head. At least, I've been a family head for many years, and never have I seen a subordinate so arrogant about his achievements, or so insolent. Have you not heard what they're saying—that the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng's achievements during the battles of the Sunshot Campaign were all thanks to Wei Wuxian alone? Absolutely absurd!"

Jiang Cheng already looked incredibly upset to hear this, but Jin Guangshan shook his head and continued.

"He had the audacity to utterly humiliate you at a grand event like the Flower-Viewing Banquet, leaving as he willed. Yesterday, he was even more insolent behind your back, even daring to utter the words, 'I couldn't care less for Jiang Wanyin, the family head!' Everyone present at the time heard…"

"That is untrue," a cold voice suddenly intercepted.

Jin Guangshan, deeply engrossed in the act of fabricating this tale, was momentarily stumped by this interruption. Like the rest of the guests present, he turned toward the one who spoke.

It was Lan Wangji, who sat with calm and proper poise in his seat. "Never have I heard Wei Ying say such a thing," he stated. "Nor have I ever heard him express any disrespect toward Sect Leader Jiang."

Lan Wangji spoke very rarely when he attended events such as these. Even during debates at symposiums, he would only respond when others directed questions and challenges at him. He was succinct and used few words, cutting right to the point and slicing others' meandering, verbose arguments to shreds. Beyond that, he almost never took the initiative to speak, so Jin Guangshan was initially more surprised than upset by the interruption. Ultimately, however, he had just been publicly called out for falsifying and exaggerating the truth, and it left him feeling awkward. Thankfully,

with Jin Guangyao at the ready to come to his rescue, the discomfort didn't last long.

"Oh, really?" Jin Guangyao said, sounding surprised. "Well, now. Wei-gongzi stormed Golden Carp Tower in such a fury that day and said so many things, every word more shocking than the next. He might have said something similar, but I can't remember the details anymore."

In truth, his memory was just as good as Lan Wangji's own, if not better. Nie Mingjue frowned slightly, immediately able to tell that he was only pretending to be confused.

Jin Guangshan, however, used the excuse he had been provided. "That's right. Either way, his attitude has always been arrogant and insolent."

One of the family heads chimed in. "I've been wanting to say this for a long time now. While Wei Wuxian contributed to the Sunshot Campaign, many others deserved more credit than him. But you don't see any of *them* acting like they're so great. Not to be blunt, but he's the son of a servant—how can someone with that kind of background act with such presumption?"

The mention of a "son of a servant" naturally made some guests think of the son of a prostitute who stood among them in the hall. Jin Guangyao no doubt noticed the unkind looks, but his perfect smile did not falter even once.

The crowd began to follow the flow of the conversation, expressing their displeasure.

"Sect Leader Jin approached Wei Ying with good intentions when he asked him to hand over the Yin Tiger Tally—he did it out of fear that he might not be able to control it, that he might cause a terrible disaster. And yet Wei Ying measured the stature of a great man with the yardstick of a wretch! Does he think everyone covets that spiritual weapon of his? What a laugh. Who *doesn't* have a great treasure or two in their family?"

"Right from the start, I always thought his cultivating the demonic path would end in trouble. You see? The urge to kill is already starting to take hold. Indiscriminately killing our own people for the sake of some Wen dogs…"

Just then, a voice cautiously cut in. "I don't think it was indiscriminate…?"

Lan Wangji seemed to have entered a meditative state of emptiness where nothing entered his ears. But when he heard this, he looked up and gazed in the direction from which the voice had come.

The one who had spoken was a beautiful young woman standing beside a family head. Her dissenting opinion was immediately attacked by nearby cultivators.

"What are you implying?"

The reaction seemed to scare the young woman, who replied with even greater caution, "I…I'm not implying anything. There's no need to get so excited. I just didn't think 'indiscriminate' was the right word."

"Whaddya mean?!" another person spat, his spittle spraying. "Ever since the Sunshot Campaign, Wei Wuxian has developed a habit of killing indiscriminately. Can you deny that?"

The young woman tried her hardest to argue back. "The Sunshot Campaign was a war—doesn't everyone kill indiscriminately on the battlefield? Judge the facts on their face. I really don't think what he did can be considered killing indiscriminately. There was a reason for it, after all. If the overseers abused the captives and murdered Wen Ning, then he didn't kill indiscriminately, he was taking revenge on their behalf…"

"You're *hilarious*!" someone exclaimed furiously. "Are you saying he was *right* to kill our people? Are you going to *praise* this as an act of justice too?!"

Another snorted contemptuously. "And who knows if the overseers even did such a thing? It's not like anyone witnessed it."

"Yeah. All the surviving overseers swore they never abused the captives and that Wen Ning accidentally fell off the cliff to his death. They were even generous enough to collect his body and bury him. And *this* is their reward. How disheartening!"

"The other overseers were afraid of being held responsible, so of course they were adamant that Wen Ning fell by accident…" the young woman countered.

"Enough of your quibbling," one of the men sneered. "We're not interested in listening to someone with an ulterior motive."

The girl flushed hard and raised her voice. "What do you mean by that?!"

"You know perfectly well what I mean, as does everyone else. You're dead set on defending him just because he flirted with you in the Xuanwu of Slaughter's cave, way back when. And even now, you're still twisting logic for him, confusing right and wrong. Heh. Women will be women."

The romantic tale of Wei Wuxian saving a damsel in distress while trapped in the depths of the Xuanwu of Slaughter's cave had been a popular story for some time now. At the mention of it, it finally dawned on many of the guests that this young woman was that very "Mianmian."

Immediately, someone grumbled, "I was gonna say… No wonder she's so keen on speaking up for Wei Wuxian…"

Mianmian was furious. "How was I twisting logic or confusing right and wrong? I'm simply stating the existing facts. What's that got to do with me being a woman? Are you attacking me on other fronts just because you can't win against my argument?"

"*Tsk, tsk, tsk*. Just look at you, acting as if you're so *impartial*," someone mocked her. "How can you consider the facts when your heart is so biased?"

"Don't waste your breath on her. I can't believe a person like that belongs to my sect, let alone managed to worm her way into a meeting at the Touchstone Pavilion. Just standing next to her embarrasses me."

Many of the ones attacking her were her peers within her own sect, standing beside her as part of the same group. Mianmian was so angry that her eyes turned red and began to brim with tears.

Moments later, she exclaimed loudly, "Fine! Your voices are louder than mine! Fine! You're the ones in the right!"

With teeth gritted, she tore off her clan uniform and slapped it down on the table. The resulting *bang* was so loud that it turned the heads of the leaders and luminaries in the first few rows who hadn't been paying attention. The ones near her were stunned by the action, which meant she was withdrawing from her clan.

Mianmian turned and left without another word. She had already been gone for a while before someone loudly yelled after her.

"Don't even think about putting that thing back on if you've got the guts to take it off…!"

"Who does she think she is… Withdraw, then, for all we care! What's she getting in such a snit over?"

Scattered noises of agreement began to surface.

"Women will be women; say a few words to them and they fall apart. She'll come crawling back after a few days."

"That's for sure. After all, it was just recently that she was finally promoted from a servant to a sect disciple, heh…"

Disregarding the hubbub around him, Lan Wangji also rose to his feet and left. Lan Xichen made inquiries to clarify what the minor disturbance had been about, and hearing the crowd's comments going in an increasingly unsavory direction, he spoke up in a grim tone.

"Everyone, she has already left. Cease your discussion now."

Thus spoke Zewu-jun, and so the others naturally had to give him face. The topic was dropped, and disjointed chatter resumed inside Touchstone Pavilion, rebuking both Wen dogs and Wei Wuxian. Fervent anger surged through the room, comments were bitten out carelessly through gritted teeth, and no dissenting voices would be heard.

Taking advantage of the mood, Jin Guangshan turned to Jiang Cheng.

"He's planned on going to the Burial Mounds for a long time now, hasn't he? After all, with his abilities, establishing his own sect would be a simple matter. He's using this chance to break from the Jiang Clan. He plans to fly away, free as a bird. You rebuilt the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng with such painstaking effort. He's well aware of his involvement in many controversies, but he doesn't restrain himself and constantly causes you trouble. You've never been a factor in his considerations."

"That's not the case," Jiang Cheng replied with forced calm. "Wei Wuxian has always been like this, ever since he was young. Even my father couldn't do anything about him."

"Could Fengmian-xiong *really* do nothing about him?" Jin Guangshan chuckled dryly. "Fengmian-xiong did always favor him so."

The corners of Jiang Cheng's lips twitched at the word "favor."

"Sect Leader Jiang, you are not your father," Jin Guangshan continued. "It's only been a few years since the re-establishment of the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng. Now is the time for you to assert your might. But *he* doesn't know how to restrain himself or make himself inconspicuous. What will your new sect disciples think when they see him? Should they take him as an example and disregard you as well?"

He bombarded Jiang Cheng with one allegation after another, striking the iron while it was hot.

"No need to say any more, Sect Leader Jin," Jiang Cheng replied slowly. "I will make a trip to the Burial Mounds and resolve this matter."

While he was inwardly pleased, Jin Guangshan replied with grave sincerity, "That is the right thing to do. Sect Leader Jiang, there are certain things—and certain *people*—that should not be tolerated."

When the assembly concluded, all the clan leaders felt they had gained new and exciting topics of conversation. Their steps were as heated as their discussion, and their passionate fury was undiminished.

The Three Zun gathered behind the sea of Sparks Amidst Snow.

"You have worked hard, san-di." Lan Xichen said.

Jin Guangyao smiled in response. "Not at all. Sect Leader Jiang's table was the hardest worker of us all, bearing up admirably under the crushing force of his grip. It seems he was particularly furious today."

Nie Mingjue walked over to join the two of them where they stood. "Speaking with such *eloquence* certainly makes for hard work."

Lan Xichen smiled at this but made no comment. Jin Guangyao, knowing Nie Mingjue would seize every chance to educate him on how to be an upstanding man, was resigned. He quickly changed the subject.

"Oh, er-ge—where's Wangji? I saw him leave the venue early."

Lan Xichen gestured out front, and Jin Guangyao and Nie Mingjue turned to where he was pointing. Amidst the blooming sea of Sparks Amidst Snow, Lan Wangji and the young woman who had just withdrawn from her clan inside Touchstone Pavilion stood facing each other. Glistening tears still brimmed in the young woman's

eyes, while Lan Wangji appeared solemn. The two of them were discussing something.

Moments later, Lan Wangji bowed his head toward her.

There was solemnity and respect in his bow. The girl returned the same respect, with even graver solemnity. And then, dressed in a gauze robe with no clan emblem, she descended Golden Carp Tower with light steps.

"She has more spine than the rest of the rabble in her sect, to be sure," Nie Mingjue commented.

Jin Guangyao cheerily agreed to this. "Yeah."

Two days later, Jiang Cheng went to Yiling with thirty Yunmeng disciples.

There were indeed hundreds of loitering fierce corpses at the foot of the Burial Mounds, in front of the destroyed wall of incantations. They were unmoved when Jiang Cheng approached but let out a low growl in warning when the sect disciples behind him drew near. Jiang Cheng had the disciples wait at the bottom of the mountain and hiked up alone. He went through a dense forest and walked for a very long time before he heard voices up ahead.

Next to the mountain path were several round tree stumps. There was one big one that looked like a table and three small ones like stools. Wei Wuxian and a woman dressed in red were sitting on two of the stools. Next to them was a field, and there were several docile, honest-looking men tilling the ground, the earth crunching as their shovels broke through the soil.

Wei Wuxian jiggled his leg. "How about we plant potatoes?"

The woman's response was firm. "Radishes. Radishes are easy to grow; they don't die easily. Potatoes are hard to please."

"Radishes are gross," Wei Wuxian protested.

Jiang Cheng humphed, and only then did Wei Wuxian and Wen Qing turn their heads. They didn't appear surprised by the sight of him. Wei Wuxian stood up but didn't say a single word when Jiang

Cheng approached him. Instead, he continued up the mountain with his hands clasped behind his back. Jiang Cheng also asked no questions but simply followed him.

It wasn't long before they came upon another group of men beside the mountain path. The men were bustling about in front of a wooden frame. They were likely Wen cultivators, but they had removed their blazing sun uniforms and exchanged them for coarse fabric clothing. They climbed up and down and hustled in and out, wielding hammers and saws in their hands and hefting lumber and straw over their shoulders. They appeared no different from ordinary farmers and huntsmen. When they saw Jiang Cheng, they recognized from his clothing and sword that he was a sect leader of prominence. They stopped their work and looked over uncertainly, holding their breaths in fear and trepidation.

Wei Wuxian waved dismissively. "Carry on."

The group of men seemed relieved to hear this and continued with their work anew.

"What are they doing?" Jiang Cheng questioned.

"Can't you tell?" Wei Wuxian replied. "They're building houses."

"Building houses?" Jiang Cheng asked. "Then what about the ones I spotted tilling ground as I came up? Don't tell me you really plan on planting crops."

"Didn't you overhear all of that? We *are* planting crops," Wei Wuxian said.

Jiang Cheng was incredulous. "You're planting things on a mountain made of corpses? Will anything that grows even be edible?"

"Trust me. Anything is edible when you're hungry enough."

"Do you really plan on settling here for the long-term?" Jiang Cheng asked. "Can people even live in a hellish place like this?"

"I lived here for three months before," Wei Wuxian stated.

There was silence, and then Jiang Cheng asked, “You’re not coming back to Lotus Pier, then?”

“Yiling and Yunmeng are so close; I’ll just sneak back whenever I want, I guess,” Wei Wuxian replied lightly.

Jiang Cheng scoffed. “You wish.”

He wanted to say more but felt a sudden weight on his leg. When he looked down, he saw a very young child of one or two years clinging to him. The child, who had snuck over without him noticing, was staring at him with very round black eyes in an equally round face.

He was quite an adorable child, but unfortunately, Jiang Cheng wasn’t the type to care. He turned to Wei Wuxian and demanded, “Where’d this kid come from? Get him off me.”

Wei Wuxian bent down and picked up the child, letting him sit on his own arm. “What do you mean, get him off you? Don’t you know how to speak nicely? A-Yuan, why do you cling to people’s legs like that? No, don’t bite your nails, you were just playing in the dirt. Do you know what kind of dirt this is? Hands off, no touching my face either! Where’s Granny?”

An old woman with sparse white hair hurried over, wobbling as she walked with the support of a wooden cane. She recognized Jiang Cheng as someone important and seemed scared, her hunched figure cowering further. Wei Wuxian placed the child, who was named A-Yuan, next to her feet.

“Go play elsewhere.”

The old woman quickly hobbled over and led her young grandson away. The child looked back at them frequently, causing him to stumble as they went.

“The clan heads think you rounded up a gang of remnant rebels to take over this mountain and that you want to raise your flag high and declare yourself a king. Turns out this ‘gang’ consists

of women, children, and the weak and elderly," Jiang Cheng mocked. "Nothing but lumpy melons and split jujubes."

Wei Wuxian gave a brief self-deprecating smile.

Jiang Cheng then asked, "Where's Wen Ning?"

"Why are you asking about him all of a sudden?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Countless people have asked me this very question over the past few days. But who could I ask? Seems you're my only option," Jiang Cheng replied coldly.

Wei Wuxian pointed ahead, and the two walked side by side until they arrived before a large, spacious cave. They were hit by a blast of cold, sinister air from within. Once they entered the cave, they headed straight through the main tunnel for a stretch until Jiang Cheng's foot hit something. When he looked down, he saw that it was half a compass.

"Don't kick that," Wei Wuxian said quickly. "It's not finished yet, but it's useful."

He picked it up just as Jiang Cheng stepped on something else. Jiang Cheng looked down again and saw a wrinkled flag.

"Be careful where you're traipsing around!" Wei Wuxian admonished again. "That's useful too; I'm almost done with it."

"You're the one who left this mess everywhere!" Jiang Cheng said. "You can't blame someone for trampling on things."

"I live alone. So what if I'm a bit messy?" Wei Wuxian countered.

They kept walking. There were talismans all along the path, plastered to the walls and thrown on the ground, rolled into balls or ripped to shreds. It looked as if someone had gone mad and thrown a fit. The deeper they went into the cave, the messier it became. Jiang Cheng felt like he was suffocating.

"If you ever dared to leave your room like this at Lotus Pier, I'd have set fire to your things and burned it clean!"

They entered the main cavern. A person lay on the ground, plastered with talismans from head to toe. He was completely wrapped in them, leaving only a pair of white eyes showing. It was Wen Ning.

Jiang Cheng shot Wei Wuxian a glare. "You live here? Where do you sleep?"

Wei Wuxian tossed the things he had just picked up into a corner and pointed at a bunch of wrinkled blankets in another corner. "Snuggled up in those, I can sleep anywhere."

Jiang Cheng didn't want to discuss the matter any further. He looked down commandingly and examined the unmoving Wen Ning.

"What's with him?"

"He's a little fierce," Wei Wuxian answered. "I was afraid things might get out of hand, so I sealed him to keep him still for the time being."

"Wasn't he a stuttering scaredy-cat when he was alive?" Jiang Cheng asked. "How could he wind up this fierce after death?"

His tone didn't sound very friendly. Wei Wuxian glanced at him.

"Wen Ning was pretty timid when he was alive," he agreed. "But that's precisely why he's fierce now. All sorts of emotions were buried deep inside him: resentment, hatred, anger, fear, anxiety, frustration, pain… Too much of that built up, and it all erupted after his death. It's a power you can't imagine. Mild-mannered people are always scary when they get angry, and he runs on the same logic. Folks like him get violent after they die."

"Didn't you always say the fiercer the better?" Jiang Cheng asked. "The stronger the grudge, the greater the hatred, the stronger the destructive power."

"That's right. But I don't plan on refining Wen Ning into a corpse like that," Wei Wuxian said.

"What *do* you want to refine him into, then?"

"I want to awaken his mind."

Jiang Cheng scoffed. "You're letting your imagination run away with you again. Awaken the mind of a corpse? How would that make him any different from a living person? The way I see it, if you can actually manage that, no one will need to live at all. No one will need to seek the immortal ways, or follow the path of the Dao—they can just ask you to refine them into a fierce corpse."

Wei Wuxian laughed. "Yeah. I've also discovered that it's really fucking hard. But I already ran my mouth off about it to his sister, and now all of them believe I can do it. I gotta make it happen. How else can I possibly recover my poor old dignity…?"

Before he could finish, Jiang Cheng suddenly drew Sandu and aimed a slash at Wen Ning's throat, like he intended to slice off his head. Wei Wuxian reacted miraculously fast, striking Jiang Cheng's arm and knocking the attack aside.

"What're you doing?!" he shouted.

His yell echoed ceaselessly in the spacious Demon-Quelling Cave, the air buzzing in reverberation.

Jiang Cheng didn't sheathe his sword. "What am I doing? I should be asking *you* that," he responded sharply. "Wei Wuxian, you've been *extraordinary* lately, huh?!"

Long before Jiang Cheng hiked up the Burial Mounds, Wei Wuxian had anticipated that he wouldn't be journeying here for the simple purpose of having a friendly, pleasant chat with him. They'd kept things bottled up for so long to maintain a pretend calm. Although they had been chatting like nothing was wrong, in reality, their hearts were stretched taut as strings the entire way here. And now the string had finally snapped.

"Wen Qing and the others were forced into a corner. I had no other options. Do you think I'd want to show off otherwise?" Wei Wuxian said.

"*They* were forced into a corner? *I'm* being forced into a corner by *you*! A few days ago at Golden Carp Tower, I was singled out and lambasted by all the clans both big and small. They demanded I give them an explanation! Well, here I am to get one!"

"Demand an explanation for what?" Wei Wuxian said. "The score is settled. The overseers killed Wen Ning; Wen Ning's corpse turned fierce and killed them. A life for a life. The debt is repaid and the case is closed."

"Case closed? As if!" Jiang Cheng exclaimed. "Do you know how many eyes are watching you and that Yin Tiger Tally of yours? And now they've seized this chance. Even if you're in the right, you're considered at fault!"

"You said it yourself. Even if I'm in the right, I'm considered at fault. What other path can I take, aside from staying in a jail of my own making?"

"Other path? Of course there's another path." Jiang Cheng pointed at Wen Ning on the ground with Sandu. "The only way to salvage the situation is to settle things ourselves, before they make another move!"

"Settle how, exactly?"

"Burn this corpse immediately and hand over that gang of Wen survivors. *That's* how you can avoid becoming the subject of ridicule!" Jiang Cheng said, raising his sword again to stab.

But Wei Wuxian seized his wrist. "Don't be ridiculous! If I hand over Wen Qing and the others, their fates will be sealed!"

"You don't even know if you can get *yourself* out of this mess. Why are you worried about them? If they're executed, so be it. What's it to you?!"

Wei Wuxian was angry now. "Jiang Cheng! You… What are you saying? Take that back. Don't make me beat your ass! Don't you dare forget who helped us cremate Jiang-shushu and Madam Yu, or

who delivered the ashes that are now interred at Lotus Pier—or who took us in when Wen Chao was hunting us down!"

"*I'm* the one who wants to fucking beat your ass!" Jiang Cheng snapped back. "Yes, they helped us. But why can't you understand that the surviving Wens are public targets? It doesn't matter who they are—they're reprehensible simply by dint of bearing that family name! And anyone who defends them is risking universal condemnation! Everyone hates the Wen dogs, everyone wants them to die in the worst possible ways. Anyone who defends them is setting themselves against the rest of the world. No one will speak for them, and there won't be anyone who will speak for you!"

"I don't need anyone to speak for me," Wei Wuxian declared.

Jiang Cheng was furious. "Why are you so stubborn? If you can't do it, then move! I'll do it!"

Wei Wuxian's hold on him tightened, his fingers like an iron shackle. *"Jiang Wanyin!"*

"Wei Wuxian!" Jiang Cheng yelled. "Don't you get it? When you're on *their* side, you're a strange hero, a unique knight-errant, a force to be reckoned with who's in a league of his own. But the second you voice an opinion that differs from theirs, you're a maniac, immoral, a deviant who shuns the orthodox path. Do you really think you can just ignore them? Wander out and about in the secular world and live a carefree life? There is no such precedent!"

"If there's no such precedent, then I'll be the first!" Wei Wuxian yelled.

The two locked eyes. Their weapons had been drawn, and neither was willing to be the first to concede.

After a few moments, Jiang Cheng tried again. "Wei Wuxian, do you still not understand the situation we're in? Do I have to spell it out for you? If you're determined to protect them, then I won't be able to protect you."

"No need to protect me. Just drop me," Wei Wuxian said.

Jiang Cheng's face started to twist.

"Drop me," Wei Wuxian repeated. "Tell everyone that I defected. 'No matter what Wei Wuxian does going forward, his actions have nothing to do with the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng.'"

"…All for the sake of those Wens…?" Jiang Cheng asked. "Wei Wuxian, do you have some kind of hero complex? Will you die if you don't ride forward to save the downtrodden and cause trouble?"

Wei Wuxian was silent.

A moment passed before he said, "Which is why we might as well cut ties with each other now, so no disaster befalls the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng in the future."

If not, he really couldn't guarantee what else he might be capable of doing.

"…My mom always said it was in your nature to cause trouble for our family. She was right," Jiang Cheng muttered.

Then he sneered and mumbled to himself, "…'Attempt the impossible'? Fine. You understand the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng's motto. You understand it better than me. You all do."

He sheathed Sandu with a resonant *sching.*

"Let's fight, then," Jiang Cheng said, sounding indifferent.

Three days later, the head of the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng issued a challenge to Wei Wuxian. They fought a singularly sensational duel in Yiling.

Negotiations had failed; the two came to blows. On Wei Wuxian's orders, the fierce corpse Wen Ning struck Jiang Cheng and broke one of his arms, and Jiang Cheng stabbed Wei Wuxian. Neither side triumphed, in the end. They parted ways, each coughing blood and cursing the other, and well and truly fell out after that.

Following the duel, Jiang Cheng made this public statement: *"Wei Wuxian has defected from our clan and become a public*

enemy. The Jiang Clan of Yunmeng expelled him and has broken all ties with him, drawing a clear line between his deeds and our own. No matter what this man does going forward, his actions have nothing to do with the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng!”

Chapter 17:
Distance

— Part 1 —

AFTER THE FIGHT, Wen Ning gained an unpleasant moniker due to his terrifying display of ferocity. But that was a story for another time.

Although Jiang Cheng had stabbed him in the gut, Wei Wuxian wasn't concerned in the least. He stuffed his intestines back into his belly like nothing was the matter and ordered Wen Ning to go hunt some malicious spirits, then bought several large bags of potatoes before heading back.

Once he returned to the Burial Mounds, Wen Qing bandaged him up and then proceeded to unleash a torrent of abuse on him—for she had instructed him to buy *radish* seeds while he was out.

After that, they managed to live a peaceful and uneventful life for a while. Wei Wuxian presided over the fifty Wen cultivators, who planted some crops at the Burial Mounds. He fixed some houses, refined some corpses, and made some tools. Every day, he took a break to play with Wen Yuan, the child of one of Wen Qing's paternal cousins. Wen Yuan was only a couple years old, and Wei Wuxian would hang him from tree branches or bury him in the dirt with only his head sticking out—advising him that he would grow faster if he was watered and got some sun. Then Wen Qing would yell at him again.



Many months passed thus. There were no further developments, apart from the worsening of Wei Wuxian's already-bad reputation.

Wei Wuxian couldn't descend the mountain very often. He was the one who kept all the evil spirits on the Burial Mounds in check, so he could not go too far, nor leave for too long. But he was also an active person, and the sort who could never stay in one place—leaving him no choice but to make frequent runs to the nearby town in the name of procurement to allow himself the chance to wander around.

There was also the matter of Wen Yuan, who had been stuck in the Burial Mounds for too long. Wei Wuxian didn't think a toddler should be trapped in a place like that, playing in its dirt all the time. So one day, he took the boy along when he descended the mountain to buy necessities.

Wei Wuxian had visited this town countless times by now. He made his way to his usual vegetable stall and turned each vegetable this way and that, inspecting them.

Suddenly, he raised one and exclaimed angrily, "This potato is sprouted!"

The vegetable vendor was instantly on guard, as if suddenly facing off against a deadly enemy. "Whaddya want?!"

"Make it cheaper."

Wen Yuan clung to his leg at first, but Wei Wuxian was walking all over the place as he selected potatoes and haggled prices. After a while, Wen Yuan's short little arms got sore and he couldn't hang on anymore. He let go of Wei Wuxian's leg for only a moment in order to rest—but that was all the time it took for the flowing crowd to knock him around, and he soon lost his way. His field of vision was very low, and he couldn't find Wei Wuxian's long legs and black boots no matter where or how far he walked. Nothing but dusty, dirty, muddy legs and black trousers stretched out before him.

He felt increasingly helpless, and dizzy on top of that. As he spun around, he suddenly bumped into someone's leg.

It was a man wearing a pair of pristine, snow-white boots and walking at a very slow pace. At this sudden collision, he came to an immediate stop.

Wen Yuan looked up in trepidation. First, he saw a jade pendant hanging from the man's waist. Then, he saw a belt embroidered with rolling clouds. After that, he saw a meticulously neat collar. Finally, he was staring into a pair of eyes that were the color of glass and as cold as winter frost.

This stranger had a stern face, and he was looking down at him commandingly. Wen Yuan was seized with fright.

After all that nitpicking, Wei Wuxian decided not to buy any of the sprouted potatoes. He might wind up poisoned, and besides, the stall vendor had scoffed at the very idea of lowering his prices. To his surprise, Wen Yuan was gone when he turned to look. The color drained from his face, and he rushed off to scour the streets in search of him.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of a young child bursting into tears and hurried over to see.

Not far away, nosy passersby had crowded into a circle to gawk at something. They were whispering to themselves and pointing. When Wei Wuxian finally managed to push through the crowd, his eyes lit up.

At the very center, surrounded by the crowd, was Lan Wangji. He was dressed entirely in white, with Bichen strapped to his back, and stood frozen in place. It was a rare sight to see him looking so helpless, not knowing what to do. Taking a closer look, Wei Wuxian almost fell over laughing.

There was a child sitting on the ground, plopped right in front of Lan Wangji's feet. He was bawling, tears and snot rolling freely down his face.

Lan Wangji couldn't leave, couldn't stay, couldn't reach out, couldn't say a word. His face was stern, like he was considering his options.

The bystanders provided commentary as they peeled and snacked on melon seeds.

"What's goin' on? That itty bitty bean is crying his heart out."

"Probably got scolded by his dad," someone said with conviction.

At the suggestion of "dad," Wei Wuxian sputtered a laugh from his hiding spot in the crowd. Lan Wangji immediately looked up and denied the claim.

"I am not his father."

Wen Yuan didn't understand what anyone was talking about, but children always call for their loved ones when they are frightened. And so, he sobbed and cried, "Daddy! Daddy! *Waaaaaaaaah*…"

"Y'hear that? I told you, he's the dad!" a passerby declared immediately.

"He's definitely the father," commented a passerby who considered themselves to have a keen eye. "Their noses are cast from the same mold! It's a sure thing!"

"Oh, poor boy, he's crying so hard," said a sympathetic-looking passerby. "Did his dad yell at him?"

"What's going on over there?" a confused passerby exclaimed. "Excuse me, excuse me, my cart can't get through!"

"Don't you know how to pick up your child and comfort him?" a passerby berated Lan Wangji. "What kind of dad are you, just letting your son sit on the ground and cry?!"

"You're so young, this must be your first time being a dad," a passerby consoled Lan Wangji understandingly. "I was like that, too,

back when. I didn't know a dang thing. You'll get the hang of it once your wife bears a few more. It all takes time…"

"Don't cry, baby," a passerby cooed at the child. "Where's your mommy?"

"Yeah, where's the mom? His dad doesn't care, so where's the mom?"

Lan Wangji was drowning in the wave of noise, and his expression was growing odder by the second.

Pity the man who was born the darling of the heavens. His every word and every action were the epitome of elegance; he was the role model of role models. Never had he encountered such a situation; never had he been forced to suffer the accusations of the masses. Wei Wuxian was laughing himself to death, but upon seeing that Wen Yuan was about to pass out from weeping, he had no choice but to step forward.

Pretending to have only just discovered the two of them, he exclaimed in surprise, "Huh? Lan Zhan?"

Lan Wangji's head shot up, and the two locked eyes. For whatever reason, Wei Wuxian's eyes dodged away for a moment. But at the sound of his voice, Wen Yuan instantly crawled to his feet and ran toward Wei Wuxian, trailing two streams of tears before clinging to his leg anew.

The passersby were in an uproar.

"Who is *this*, now? What about the mom? Where's the mom? Who exactly is the dad?"

"Move along, move along," Wei Wuxian waved dismissively.

Seeing that the show was over, the audience reluctantly dispersed. Wei Wuxian turned his head and smiled at Lan Wangji.

"What a coincidence. What brings you here to Yiling, Lan Zhan?"

"A Night Hunt," Lan Wangji replied. "I was passing through."

The tone of his voice was the same as always, with no shred of scorn or contempt or antagonism. Wei Wuxian suddenly felt relieved.

And then, he heard Lan Wangji ask a hesitant question. "…This child?"

When his mind was relaxed, Wei Wuxian would always run his mouth without restraint. "I birthed him," he responded with confident ease.

Lan Wangji's brows twitched, and Wei Wuxian burst out laughing.

"I'm joking, obviously. He's someone else's kid; I'm just taking him out to play. What did you do earlier? How'd you make him cry?"

"I did not do anything," Lan Wangji replied evenly.

Wen Yuan was still sniffling as he hugged Wei Wuxian's leg. Wei Wuxian understood what he was going through—while Lan Wangji was good-looking, a child of A-Yuan's age probably didn't know what beauty was. He could only tell that this person wasn't very nice, and that he was cold and stern. He was scared of Lan Wangji's expression, which was engraved with deep-seated bitterness. It simply couldn't be helped.

Wei Wuxian hauled Wen Yuan up into his arms to playfully bounce him up and down and comfort him with his words. Suddenly, he spotted a vendor selling a variety of goods on the side of the road. The man was still watching the three of them with a toothy grin.

Wei Wuxian pointed at the colorful trinkets in the vendor's selection. "A-Yuan, look over there. Are they pretty?"

This got Wen Yuan's attention. He sniffled. "…Yes."

"Do they smell nice?"

"Yes."

The vendor beckoned them over hurriedly. "They look nice *and* smell nice. Won't you buy one, young master?"

"Do you want one?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Assuming that he was going to buy him something, Wen Yuan shyly replied, "Yes."

However, Wei Wuxian simply started walking in the other direction. "Ha ha, let's go."

It was as if Wen Yuan had been struck by a heavy blow. Tears filled his eyes once more. Lan Wangji had been coolly watching from the sidelines but could no longer stand idly by.

"Why will you not purchase an item for him?"

"And why should I?" Wei Wuxian asked curiously.

"You asked if he wanted an item. Was this not an indication of your intention to buy it for him?"

"Asking is asking, buying is buying. They're two separate things," Wei Wuxian replied in a deliberate tone. "Why do I have to buy something just because I asked him about it?"

Lan Wangji surprisingly had no answer to this. He stared at Wei Wuxian for a long while before moving his gaze to Wen Yuan. The intensity of his gaze set Wen Yuan shuddering again.

But Lan Wangji only asked Wen Yuan, "Which…do you want?"

Wen Yuan didn't understand, so Lan Wangji pointed at the things in the vendor's load and asked again.

"Which of the things here do you want?"

Wen Yuan stared at him in fear, holding his breath.

Half an incense time later, Wen Yuan had finally stopped crying. Instead, he kept touching his pocket, which bulged with the trinkets Lan Wangji had bought for him. Seeing that his tears had finally stopped, Lan Wangji seemed to sigh in relief—and then to his surprise, Wen Yuan suddenly shuffled over with blushing cheeks and clung to his leg.

When he looked down, there was now a new addition to his limb.

Lan Wangji was speechless at the sight.

Wei Wuxian laughed hysterically. "Ha ha ha ha ha! Congrats, Lan Zhan, he likes you! He clings to the legs of anyone he likes. He'll never let go now."

Lan Wangji took two steps. Sure enough, Wen Yuan was firmly attached to his leg and showed no intention of letting go. His grip was surprisingly strong.

Wei Wuxian patted his shoulder. "Don't bother rushing off to your Night Hunt so soon. How about we go grab a bite first?"

Lan Wangji looked up at him. "A bite?" he parroted, sounding calm.

"Yeah, let's grab a bite. Don't be so cold, now. You're visiting Yiling for once and oh-so-coincidentally ran into me. Let's catch up. C'mon, it'll be my treat."

And thus was Lan Wangji hauled into a restaurant, with Wei Wuxian half pulling, half dragging him, and Wen Yuan still hanging off his leg.

Wei Wuxian took a seat inside their private room. "Go ahead," he beckoned. "Order something."

After being pushed down into a seat, Lan Wangji skimmed through the menu, then said, "You order."

"It's my treat, so you should be the one ordering," Wei Wuxian replied. "Get whatever you like, don't hold back."

He hadn't bought those poisonous sprouted potatoes earlier, so it just so happened that he actually had enough money to pay. Lan Wangji wasn't the type to argue back and forth, so he made his selection after a moment of thought.

Wei Wuxian laughed when he heard him say the names of the dishes so evenly. "Dang, Lan Zhan. And here I thought you Gusu folk didn't eat spicy food. Your tastes are pretty intense. Want a drink?"

Lan Wangji shook his head.

"As expected of Hanguang-jun; still sticking to the rules even when out and about," Wei Wuxian commented. "I won't order a share for you, then."

Wen Yuan sat by Lan Wangji's feet. Taking the little wooden knife, the little wooden sword, the clay doll, the straw-woven butterflies, and other such trinkets, he lined them up on the mat and counted his hoard with great fondness. Wei Wuxian watched as he attached himself to Lan Wangji, nuzzling him so relentlessly that it was difficult for Lan Wangji to even drink his tea.

Wei Wuxian whistled to beckon him over. "A-Yuan, come here."

Wen Yuan looked at Wei Wuxian, who had buried him in the dirt like a radish just a few days ago. He then looked at Lan Wangji, who had just bought him a pile of toys. His butt did not scoot an inch closer, and an honest response was writ large upon his face: *No.*

Wei Wuxian tried again. "Come over here, you're bothering him."

"It is fine. Let him stay." Lan Wangji said.

Wen Yuan happily hugged his leg again. This time, his target was Lan Wangji's thigh. Wei Wuxian twirled his chopsticks and laughed.

"Whoever gives the milk is Mom; whoever gots the dough is Dad. Outrageous."

The dishes and drinks came quickly, filling the table with bright, flaming red. There was a single bowl of sweet soup, which Lan Wangji had ordered for Wen Yuan. Wei Wuxian called for him a number of times and tapped on the bowl, but Wen Yuan still kept his head down, mumbling at the two butterflies in his hands. One moment he was pretending to be the butterfly on the left, saying shyly, *"…I like you a lot."* The next moment he pretended to be the butterfly on the right, and replied happily, *"I like you a lot too!"* He was having a fantastic time playing as the two butterflies.

Wei Wuxian laughed so hard he was out of breath, swaying back and forth in his seat. "Oh my *god*. A-Yuan, you tiny little thing, who'd you learn that from? 'I like you,' 'you like me'—do you even know what 'like' is? Stop playing and eat. Your new dad ordered all of this for you. It's good stuff."

Wen Yuan finally tucked the little butterflies away in his pocket and sat next to Lan Wangji. He picked up the bowl and a small spoon, and began to eat the sweet soup. Wen Yuan had previously lived at the Qishan detention camp and later moved to the Burial Mounds. The food in both places was too foul to describe, which was why this bowl of sweet soup was a novel delicacy to him. After only a few bites, he was unable to stop eating—but he still managed to pass the bowl to Wei Wuxian like he was eagerly offering treasure.

"…Xian-gege… Gege, eat."

Wei Wuxian obliged and enjoyed the offering. "Mmm, not bad. Seems you still know to show me some respect."

"Food is taken in silence," Lan Wangji said. Then, to help Wen Yuan understand, he repeated himself in plain speech. "Do not talk while eating."

Wen Yuan hastily nodded, stopping his chatter and engrossing himself in his meal.

"This really is outrageous. I have to say something a dozen times before he listens to me, but he listens to *you* the moment you speak," Wei Wuxian complained. "How absolutely outrageous."

"You as well—food is taken in silence," Lan Wangji replied impassively.

Wei Wuxian grinned and took a drink, then fiddled with the cup in his hand. "After all these years, you honestly…haven't changed a single bit. Hey, Lan Zhan, what are you hunting in Yiling? I know this place well. Want me to give you pointers?"

"No need," Lan Wangji said.

The representatives of prominent clans often had secret missions they couldn't divulge to others, so Wei Wuxian didn't pry further. "I finally ran into an old acquaintance who isn't avoiding me. I've been so cooped up for the past few months, it's killin' me. Anything big happen out there lately?"

"What would be considered 'big'?" Lan Wangji asked.

"Like a new clan sprouting up somewhere, a clan expanding their residence, clans forming an alliance, that kinda thing. C'mon, let's chat a little. Engage in some casual conversation."

Ever since his fake falling out with Jiang Cheng, he'd heard no news of events taking place in the outside world. At best, he only heard the sundry idle talk in town when he went shopping.

"There will soon be a marriage alliance," Lan Wangji said.

"Between which families?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"The Jin Clan of Lanling and the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng," Lan Wangji answered.

Wei Wuxian's hand stopped toying with the wine cup and froze completely. He was dumbfounded.

"My shi… Miss Jiang and Jin Zixuan?"

Lan Wangji inclined his head.

"When did this happen? When's the wedding?!" Wei Wuxian exclaimed.

"In seven days," Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian shakily brought the wine cup to his lips without realizing it was already empty. A sudden desolation filled him, and he didn't know whether it was anger, shock, upset, or resignation.

Although he had expected this long before he left the Jiang Clan, hearing the actual news so suddenly caused a thousand emotions and a million words to flood his mind. He wanted desperately to let it all out but didn't know where to start. This was such huge news—why hadn't Jiang Cheng even thought of a way to

tell him yet. If he hadn't run into Lan Wangji today, he might've learned about it even later!

But then again, what did it matter if anyone thought to tell him? Jiang Cheng had already made a public announcement and the clans believed his surface story: Wei Wuxian had defected and was henceforth unrelated to the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng. Even if he knew about the wedding, he couldn't attend the celebration. It was right for Jiang Cheng not to tell him, because he might have done something impulsive if he had.

It was a long moment before Wei Wuxian mumbled to himself, "What a score for that Jin Zixuan."

He poured another cup.

"Lan Zhan, how do you feel about this marriage?" When he received no response from Lan Wangji, Wei Wuxian continued, "Oh yeah, what am I asking you for? What do you care? You never think about this stuff."

He tossed back another cup. "I know that a lot of people say my shijie doesn't deserve Jin Zixuan. Ha. But in my eyes, it's Jin Zixuan who doesn't deserve my shijie. And yet…"

And yet, Jin Zixuan just had to be the one Jiang Yanli liked.

Wei Wuxian smacked the wine cup down on the table.

"Lan Zhan! My shijie deserves the best person in the whole world, you know." He slapped the table, pride coloring his slightly inebriated brow. "We will make this wedding a grand event; one that awes everyone, one that will be praised for a hundred years. No one will ever match it. I will see my shijie marry in absolute glory."

"Mn," Lan Wangji acknowledged.

Wei Wuxian scoffed. "What are you 'mn'-ing for? I can't actually go see it anymore."

Wen Yuan had finished his sweet soup and was playing with the straw butterflies again. The butterflies' long antennae had become entangled, and he couldn't free them. Seeing how anxious

he looked, Lan Wangji took the butterflies from his hands and untangled the antennae in no time at all before returning the toys to him.

Wei Wuxian, somewhat distracted by the sight, forced a brief smile. "A-Yuan, don't rub your face on him. You have soup smeared all around your mouth, you'll stain his clothes."

Wearing a neutral expression, Lan Wangji produced a plain white hand towel and wiped the bit of soup from Wen Yuan's face. Wei Wuxian whistled.

"Darn, Lan Zhan. I would never have suspected you were actually good with kids. If you're any nicer to him, he won't wanna go back with me…"

Wei Wuxian's face changed all of a sudden. He pulled a talisman from his robes. Already in flames, the talisman was reduced to ashes in a few seconds. Lan Wangji's gaze sharpened, and Wei Wuxian leapt to his feet.

"Shoot."

That talisman was the heart of an alarm array he had set up at the Burial Mounds. Should anything happen at the Burial Mounds while he was gone—such as the array breaking or blood being spilled—the talisman would ignite to alert him something was wrong.

Wei Wuxian stuffed Wen Yuan under his arm and hurriedly explained, "Sorry, Lan Zhan, I gotta go back!"

Something fell from Wen Yuan's pocket. "Bu…butterfly!" he cried.

But Wei Wuxian had already bolted out of the restaurant with him under his arm. Moments later, a white silhouette flashed in the corner of his eye. Lan Wangji had caught up and was running at his side.

"Lan Zhan?" Wei Wuxian was surprised. "Why are you following us?"

Lan Wangji handed the dropped butterfly back to Wen Yuan, not answering the question. Instead, he asked, "Why not travel by sword?"

"Forgot to bring it!" Wei Wuxian answered.

Without a word, Lan Wangji seized his waist and pulled him onto Bichen. They rose into the sky together. Wen Yuan was too young to have ever ridden a flying sword, so he should have been quite scared, but Bichen was so steady that he felt no turbulence at all. Furthermore, the townsfolk were so shocked at the sight of them so swiftly shooting off into the skies at will that they crowded around to watch. All Wen Yuan could feel was excitement at the novelty of the experience. He cheered loudly.

Wei Wuxian breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks."

"Where to?" Lan Wangji asked.

"That way!" Wei Wuxian directed.

The three flew at top speed in the direction of the Burial Mounds. Wei Wuxian grew even tenser at the sight of its black summit breaking through the clouds.

They could already hear the howling of fierce corpses coming from the distant black forest. And it wasn't just one or two—it was a horde of them. Lan Wangji made a hand seal and Bichen flew even faster, though their passage remained steady all the while.

The moment they landed, they saw a shrieking black shadow leap from the woods in pursuit of its human target. Bichen slashed it in half. The person on the ground was tragically pale, and he yelled to Wei Wuxian the moment he saw him.

"Wei-gongzi!"

Wei Wuxian hurled out a talisman. "Si-shu, what happened?!"

"The Demon-Quelling Cave… The fierce corpses escaped from the Demon-Quelling Cave!"

"Didn't I set up a barrier array? Who touched it?" Wei Wuxian demanded.

"No one!" Si-shu said. "It was…it was…"

Just then, a woman's loud cry came from up ahead.

"A-Ning!"

Within the black forest, over a dozen Wen cultivators were confronting an extremely savage opponent—and that opponent was Wen Ning. His eyes were rolled all the way back, showing only a field of white, and barely any of the talismans he'd been wrapped in remained. He was dragging around two other fierce corpses that he had already ripped apart with his bare hands, reducing them to almost nothing but bones dripping with black blood. And yet Wen Ning continued to beat them with ferocious aggression, slamming them into the ground over and over again, as if he wouldn't be satisfied until they were reduced to ashes. Wen Qing stood on the front lines of the cultivator team, wielding a sword.

"Didn't I say not to touch the talismans on him?!" Wei Wuxian yelled.

Wen Qing didn't even have time to be surprised by Lan Wangji's sudden appearance.

"No one touched them!" she yelled back. "No one even entered the Demon-Quelling Cave! He went berserk and tore them off on his own! And he didn't just rip them off himself, he destroyed the barrier array on the Blood Pool and the Cave. All the fierce corpses that were in the Blood Pool have crawled out. Wei Wuxian—go save Granny and the others, hurry! They can't hang on any longer!"

A strange hissing noise came from above as she spoke. When the group looked up, they saw several fierce corpses had climbed into the trees. They were curled like snakes in the branches, baring their teeth at the humans below. A disgusting, unknown viscous substance drooled from their snarling fangs.

Wen Ning looked up and saw them as well. He discarded the broken, mangled limbs he held and jumped into the trees with a single leap!

The tree he scaled was at least fifteen meters tall. To think he could jump so high in a single bound! Truly, his explosive strength was shocking to the extreme. Once he landed atop the tree, it only took two swipes for him to tear the fierce corpses limb from limb. Body parts flew haphazardly, and the sky rained blood, but he still wasn't satisfied. Wen Ning jumped down from the other side of the tree.

Wei Wuxian pulled out Chenqing. "Lan—!"

He wanted to ask Lan Wangji to save the others first, which would allow him to face Wen Ning without worry. But when he looked back, the man was already gone. Just as worry seized him, he heard the heavens shake with the force of a guqin's loud, crisp chord. The sound shocked the crows of the black forest into wild flight.

As it turned out, he hadn't needed to ask; Lan Wangji had already taken action. Wei Wuxian relaxed. He brought Chenqing to his lips and let loose a long trilling note. Wen Ning's form faltered slightly as he landed, and Wei Wuxian seized this chance to shout to him.

"Wen Ning! Do you recognize me?!"

The guqin strummed three times and then went quiet, which meant Lan Wangji had subdued all the runaway fierce corpses with three notes. Wen Ning drooped a little, a low growl emitting from the bottom of his throat. He was the very image of an agitated wild beast, alert and ready to pounce at any given moment.

As Wei Wuxian was about to play his flute once more, he suddenly noticed Wen Yuan was still firmly clinging to his leg, not daring to breathe. He had completely forgotten about him all this time!

He hastily picked up Wen Yuan and tossed him in Wen Qing's direction.

"Take him and go hide somewhere far away!"

And then Wen Ning tackled him.

It was like he had been hit by a falling boulder. Wei Wuxian was sent flying backward from the impact, crashing into a tree. Warm blood rose up his throat and he cursed.

Lan Wangji saw this take place just as he turned around. His face changed drastically, and he rushed to Wei Wuxian. Wen Qing, who had just pushed Wen Yuan into someone else's arms to go check on Wei Wuxian, was startled to find that Lan Wangji had gotten there before she could. Lan Wangji had practically folded Wei Wuxian into his embrace, clutching his hand in his own to directly transfer his spiritual power to him.

"Let go of him, there's no need for that!" Wen Qing said hurriedly. "Let me! I am Wen Qing!"

Wen Qing of Qishan was a doctor of the highest caliber. It was only upon her arrival that Lan Wangji stopped transferring spiritual power and allowed her to examine Wei Wuxian—but he would not let go of his hand.

However, Wei Wuxian pushed him away. "Don't let him run off!"

After injuring Wei Wuxian, Wen Ning had begun to walk down the mountain, his arms hanging slack at his sides. Down the mountain was where the rest of the Wen cultivators were hiding from the fierce corpses.

"Run! Hurry! He's heading your way!" Wen Qing yelled down toward them.

Wei Wuxian struggled free of Lan Wangji, took a deep breath, and began to pursue Wen Ning. Lan Wangji hurried after him and caught up again.

"Where is your sword?"

Wei Wuxian hurled forth twelve talismans. "Who knows where I tossed it?!"

The twelve yellow talismans formed a row in the air and ignited, binding Wen Ning with a chain of flame. Lan Wangji strummed his guqin with a flick of his wrist, and Wen Ning's legs were bound by an invisible string. Although he paused for a moment, he then continued arduously forward.

Wei Wuxian placed Chenqing to his lips. Because of the injury he had suffered, some blood sprayed forth as he blew a note. His brows knitted, but he endured the bloody, painful turbulence in his chest and continued playing the flute without a single tremor.

Thanks to their combined efforts, Wen Ning finally dropped to his knees. He looked to the sky and let loose a long howl, sending shock waves through the leaves of the black forest. Wei Wuxian, unable to hold back any longer, choked out a mouthful of blood.

The sound of the guqin named Wangji suddenly turned sharp, and Wen Ning curled up on the ground, clutching his head and roaring like mad.

"A-Ning! *A-Ning!*" Wen Qing cried mournfully.

She rushed over to him, but Wei Wuxian shouted a warning to her.

"Watch out!"

Seeing her little brother so distressed by the sound of the guqin hurt Wen Qing just as much. She knew he would be a danger to all present in his current state if they failed to strike decisively and mercilessly, but her heart nonetheless ached for him.

"Hanguang-jun, please have mercy!"

"Lan Zhan! Go softer with your strikes…" Wei Wuxian urged.

"…Gong…zi…"

Wei Wuxian stopped. "Wait…?" Then he called out, "Lan Zhan, could you stop for a minute?!"

The voice came from Wen Ning.

Lan Wangji flattened his hand over the vibrating strings, halting the resounding note.

"Wen Ning?!" Wei Wuxian called out again.

Wen Ning arduously raised his head.

His eyes were no longer fields of empty, deathly white. Rather…they were now dotted with a pair of black pupils!

Wen Ning opened and closed his mouth, then tried again. "… Wei…gongzi…?"

Each word was squeezed out with great effort, and he seemed to almost bite his own tongue in the process—but the words spoken were indeed human words. It wasn't meaningless growling.

Wen Qing was completely dumbfounded. Moments later, she let out a loud wail and stumbled as she lunged over.

"A-Ning!" she cried.

She tackled him with such force that both of them fell to the ground.

"Jie…jie…" Wen Ning said.

Wen Qing pulled her little brother into a hug, crying and laughing, and buried her head in his chest. "It's me! It's jiejie, it's jiejie! Oh, A-Ning!"

She kept crying Wen Ning's name. The other cultivators looked like they wanted to join the embrace, but didn't dare, so they simply cheered and laughed and randomly hugged each other. Si-shu shouted in crazed happiness as he ran down the mountain.

"Everything's good now! It's done! It's done! A-Ning's awake!"

Wei Wuxian walked over and crouched next to Wen Ning.

"How're you feeling right now?"

Wen Ning lay on the ground, his limbs and neck still somewhat stiff.

"I… I…"

He remained stuck there a while before he finally said, "…I want to cry really badly, but I can't. What's going on…?"

Wei Wuxian was silent a while, then patted his shoulder. "You remember, don't you? That you're dead."

Having confirmed Wen Ning was truly conscious, Wei Wuxian inwardly let out a long sigh of relief.

He had succeeded.

Driven by a momentary angry impulse, he had turned Wen Ning into a low-level fierce corpse. Although he had been able to prompt Wen Ning to identify and tear apart the overseers who had murdered him, it had only made Wen Qing all the more anguished when she woke to a little brother who didn't recognize her at all—one who only knew how to growl like a mad dog, to tear and devour flesh, to guzzle blood like water.

Once he had calmed down, Wei Wuxian swore to her in perfect confidence that he could return Wen Ning to a conscious state—and no one was the wiser that he was only talking big to ease her mind. In truth, he wasn't at all sure he could succeed, but he had no choice but to brazenly forge ahead.

He had racked his brain for answers, forgoing sleep and food for days on end. And now he had finally managed to fulfill his promise.

Wen Qing cupped Wen Ning's pale face. Fat tears poured from her eyes like beads, one after another. At last, she could hold it in no longer and completely dissolved into wailing, crying the same way she had the night she first saw Wen Ning's dead body.

Wen Ning rubbed her back with one stiff hand. More and more of the Wens came up the mountain, either flinging themselves into the pile of crying people or gazing in respect and gratitude at Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji.

Wei Wuxian knew the two siblings probably had a lot to say to each other, and also that Wen Qing would not want anyone to see her crying like this. He spoke up.

"Lan Zhan."

Lan Wangji gazed at him.

"Since you're here, wanna go inside and sit for a bit?"

The two of them walked up the mountain and arrived at the mouth of a cave that spewed forth sinister winds.

"The Demon-Quelling Cave?" Lan Wangji inquired.

"That's right," Wei Wuxian said. "I came up with the name, whaddya think?"

Lan Wangji was silent.

"I know. You must be thinking, 'It's not very good,'" Wei Wuxian answered on his behalf. "I've heard everyone gossiping since word of the name got out. They say I'm a big-time demonic overlord myself, a walker of the demonic path—how am I not embarrassed to call my little old lair the 'Demon-Quelling Cave'?"

Lan Wangji didn't comment. The two had entered the cave at this point, and Wei Wuxian's laugh echoed in the empty, spacious interior.

"But they're wrong. The name I chose doesn't mean what they think it does."

"How so?" Lan Wangji asked.

"Simple," Wei Wuxian answered. "I named it that because I sleep here most of the time. An evil overlord sprawled unconscious on the ground of a cave—isn't that a 'demon quelled'?"

Lan Wangji was speechless.

The two entered the main room of the cave system.

"Then what about the Blood Pool?" Lan Wangji asked.

Wei Wuxian pointed at a serene pool. "That's it, right there."

The light inside the cave was dim, so it was difficult to tell whether the pool was black or red. The astringent smell of blood emanated from the water, neither light nor heavy. There had been a barrier array drawn around the pool, but Wen Ning had destroyed it. Wei Wuxian constructed and reinforced a new one.

"It is heavy with yin energy," Lan Wangji commented.

"Yeah, it's lousy with it," Wei Wuxian agreed. "Good for nurturing evil stuff. This is where I 'raise' unfinished fierce corpses. Guess how many of them lurk beneath?"

He flashed a brief smile.

"Well, to be honest, even I don't know how many there are in there. But the water is starting to smell more and more like blood."

Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but Wei Wuxian's face looked particularly pale, and his smile seemed vaguely sinister. Lan Wangji watched him quietly.

"Wei Ying."

"What?"

"Are you really in control?" Lan Wangji asked.

"In control of what?" Wei Wuxian asked. "Oh, you mean Wen Ning? Of course. See? He regained consciousness already." He added, sounding pleased, "A fierce corpse without precedent."

"What will you do, should he go berserk again?" Lan Wangji questioned.

"I have plenty of experience dealing with it now. I'm the one controlling him, so as long as I'm fine, he'll have no issues." Wei Wuxian said.

After a moment's silence, Lan Wangji pressed, "And if you are *not* fine?"

Wei Wuxian firmly dismissed the thought. "That won't happen."

"How can you guarantee as much?"

"That won't happen," Wei Wuxian reiterated, his tone firm. "It *can't* happen either."

"Do you plan on staying like this from now on?" Lan Wangji asked.

"And what's wrong with that?" Wei Wuxian shot back. "Do you scorn my great domain? This mountain is bigger than your Cloud Recesses, you know. The food is better too."

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said. "You know what I mean."

"…Lan Zhan…" Wei Wuxian was exasperated. "You really are unbelievable. I changed the subject, but you brought it right back."

There was a sudden itch in his throat, a sudden surge of blood rushing up. Wei Wuxian quietly cleared his throat a couple times. Seeing Lan Wangji move to take his hand again, he dodged away.

"What are you doing?"

"Your injury," Lan Wangji explained.

"Don't worry about it," Wei Wuxian stated. "Why waste spiritual power on such a minor injury? I just need to sit down for a while, and it'll get better on its own."

Lan Wangji stopped bothering to argue with him and tried grabbing for his hand again. Just then, two people walked into the cave.

Wen Qing's voice echoed in the cave. "'Sit down for a little while and it'll get better on its own'? Did you already write me off as dead?"

Following behind her was Wen Ning, who was holding a tea tray. Wen Ning's skin was deathly pale, and there were traces of spells on his neck that hadn't been completely wiped clean. Wen Yuan hung from his leg. The moment they entered, he dashed to Wei Wuxian's side in a flurry of pitter-pattering feet and transferred himself to his leg instead. Seeing Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji look toward him at the same time, Wen Ning's lips twitched. It seemed

like he wanted to smile, but the muscles of his face were too stiff to manage the movement. All he could do was greet them aloud.

"Wei-gongzi… Lan-gongzi…"

Wei Wuxian raised his captive leg into the air, lifting Wen Yuan with it, and shook. "Why are you guys here? Finished crying already?"

"Just watch how I'll make you cry later!" Wen Qing rebuked. Though her words were ferocious, her voice was still nasally from weeping.

"What a joke," Wei Wuxian shot back. "How can you make me… Ahh!"

Wen Qing had stridden over and slapped him hard on the back, which forced Wei Wuxian to sputter out a mouthful of blood. His face was full of disbelief.

"You… You're vicious…"

His eyes closed as soon as he spoke, and he fainted on the spot. Lan Wangji blanched and caught him.

"Wei Ying!"

Wen Qing flashed three gleaming silver needles. "I have far more vicious tricks that you haven't seen yet," she rebuked. "Get up!"

Wei Wuxian rose from Lan Wangji's arms like nothing had happened and wiped away the blood on his lips.

"I'll pass on that. 'The most vicious be the heart of a woman,'[3] they say. I don't wanna witness it firsthand."

Wen Qing's slap had simply expelled the bad blood clogging his lungs. Would Qishan's greatest doctor, renowned among all the clans, really not know how to control the strength of her hand? Realizing it was just another prank, Lan Wangji turned around with an angry flick of his sleeves, as if not wanting to give such a silly person any more attention.

Wen Ning had only just woken, so his reactions lagged one beat behind. Struck dumb when he saw Wei Wuxian spew blood, he only now remembered that he'd been the one to injure him when he was still without his conscious mind.

"Gongzi, I'm sorry…" he apologized, voice heavy with guilt.

Wei Wuxian waved him off. "All right, that's enough. Do you really think that punch of yours could do anything to me?"

Wen Qing's jet-black eyes observed Lan Wangji's expression intently. "Why don't you have a seat, Hanguang-jun?"

It finally dawned on Wei Wuxian—after entering the cave, Lan Wangji had never once sat down. No wonder he felt like he had forgotten something. The only places to sit were the few rock beds, and every single one of them was covered with miscellaneous oddities. There were flags and knives and boxes, bloody bandages and half-eaten fruit. It was a devastating sight to behold.

"But there's nowhere to sit, I guess," Wei Wuxian said.

"Of course there is," Wen Qing said coolly, then ruthlessly swiped everything on one of the rock beds to the ground. "See? There you go."

Wei Wuxian was utterly shocked. "Hey!"

Wen Ning chimed in as well. "Yes, yes, Lan-gongzi, sit and have some tea…"

He pushed the tray in his hands in Lan Wangji's direction. There were two tea cups placed on the tray, washed very clean. But when Wei Wuxian took a look inside them, he scolded him.

"So shabby, offering plain water to guests. There's not a single tea leaf!"

"I asked, and Si-shu said there was no tea in our food stores…" Wen Ning tried to explain.

Wei Wuxian picked up one of the cups and took a sip. "That's *so* not okay. Gotta prepare some the next time we have guests,

'kay?"

It was only after he spoke that he felt ridiculous for saying it. What next time? What guests?

"Well, aren't you shameless?" Wen Qing asked. "Every time you're sent down the mountain to make purchases, you always bring back a random mess of things. Where are the radish seeds I asked you to buy?"

"What do you mean, 'random mess of things'?" Wei Wuxian protested. "I've been away getting fun toys for A-Yuan. Haven't I, A-Yuan?"

But Wen Yuan wasn't cooperative. "Xian-gege is lying. It was *this* gege who bought the toys for me."

Wei Wuxian was furious. "Preposterous!"

Laughter filled the Demon-Quelling Cave, but Lan Wangji abruptly turned around without another word and headed toward the exit. Wen Qing and Wen Ning were both taken aback, while Wei Wuxian called after him.

"Lan Zhan?"

Lan Wangji's steps paused for a moment. His tone devoid of emotion, he stated, "It is time for me to leave."

He exited the Demon-Quelling Cave without looking back. Wen Ning was panic-stricken once more, as if it were his fault that Lan Wangji was leaving.

"Gege!" Wen Yuan called out to him anxiously.

He dashed forward on his short little legs, wanting to chase after him, but Wei Wuxian caught him easily and tucked him under his arm.

"You guys wait for me here," he said.

He hurried out of the cave with large strides, combining three steps into two, and caught up to Lan Wangji.

"You're leaving? I'll see you off."

Lan Wangji was silent and would not respond.

Wen Yuan looked up at Lan Wangji from where he was still tucked under Wei Wuxian's arm. "Gege, you're not gonna stay to eat dinner with us?"

Lan Wangji glanced at him, then reached out and hesitantly stroked his head. Wen Yuan thought that meant he was staying, and delight showed on his face.

"A-Yuan heard a secret," he whispered. "They said there are lots of good things to eat today…"

"This gege has food at home, so we won't be keeping him, 'kay?" Wei Wuxian said.

"Ohh," said Wen Yuan, his disappointment beyond words. His head drooped, and he stopped talking.

The two of them walked quietly the entire way, child in tow, until they reached the foot of the Burial Mounds. Though they both stopped at the same time, they still did not speak.

It was a while before Wei Wuxian said, "Lan Zhan, you asked me earlier if I planned on staying like this. The truth is, I want to ask you a question too—if I *don't* stay like this, what else can I do? Should I abandon the demonic path? Then what about the folks on this mountain? Should I give *them* up? I couldn't do it. I'm sure if it were you, you couldn't either. Can't anyone give me an easy, broad road? A road I can walk that allows me to protect the ones I want to protect, without needing to cultivate the demonic path?"

Lan Wangji gazed at him. He didn't respond, but deep down they both knew the answer.

There was no such path.

There was no solution.

"Thank you for keeping me company today, and thank you for telling me about my shijie's wedding," Wei Wuxian said slowly. "But—right or wrong, the decision is my own. It doesn't matter what others think of those decisions. I will bear the consequences of my

actions, whether they be good or ill. I know what I should do. And I believe everything is still within my ability to control."

Lan Wangji inclined his head and closed his eyes. It was as if he had already anticipated this stance.

This was goodbye.

On the way back up the mountain, Wei Wuxian belatedly realized he had said he was treating Lan Wangji to a meal. But in the end, the two had gone their separate ways in such a dreary mood, and he had forgotten to pay the bill.

Oops. Well, Lan Zhan is so rich, it's no big deal to make him pick up the bill again, Wei Wuxian thought to himself. *Speaking of which, he should have some money left, right? He couldn't have spent it all on just a few kids' toys. If anything, I'll treat him next time… What "next time"? Honestly…*

When he thought about it, he and Lan Wangji always parted on unhappy terms whenever they met, for one reason or another. Maybe they really weren't meant to be friends.

Either way, there was little chance they could try again in the future.

Wen Yuan held Wei Wuxian's hand with his left hand and wielded the little wooden sword with his right. The straw butterfly sat on his head.

"Xian-gege, will Rich-gege come again?"

Wei Wuxian sputtered a laugh. "What? Who's Rich-gege?"

"The rich gege is Rich-gege," Wen Yuan answered seriously.

"Then what about me?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Sure enough, Wen Yuan replied, "You're Xian-gege. Poor-gege."

Wei Wuxian shot him a look, then suddenly snatched the butterfly from him. "What, you like him because he's got money?"

Wen Yuan stood on tiptoe with an anxious cry. "Give it back… That was bought for me!"

Wei Wuxian was the nonsensical sort of man who could get excited even when messing with children. He placed the butterfly atop his own head. "I don't care. You called him Daddy too. And what do you call me? Only 'gege.' You dropped me in seniority for no good reason!"

Wen Yuan stomped his foot. "I didn't call him Daddy!"

"You did, I heard you," Wei Wuxian said. "I don't care. I wanna be more senior than 'gege' *or* 'Daddy'! What should you call me?"

Wen Yuan was aggrieved. "But… But A-Yuan doesn't wanna call you Mommy… That's so weird…"

Wei Wuxian sputtered out another laugh. "Who said to call me Mommy? The one more senior than your gege and daddy is your granddaddy! Didn't you know that? If you really like him so much, then you should've said so earlier. If you had, I would've had him take you along. His family might be rich, but they're scary. He'll take you home, lock you up indoors, and make you copy books day and night. That scare ya?!"

Wen Yuan quickly shook his head and squeaked in a small voice, "…I won't leave…I still want Granny."

Wei Wuxian continued to press him. "You want your granny but not me?"

"I do. I want Xian-gege too," Wen Yuan assured him to ingratiate himself. He started counting on his fingers, one by one. "I want Rich-gege too. And A-Qing-jiejie, Ning-gege, Si-shu, Liu-shu…"

Wei Wuxian tossed the butterfly back onto his head. "Enough, enough. You're drowning me in that crowd."

Wen Yuan quickly tucked the straw butterfly back into his pocket, scared it might get snatched away again. He then pressed Wei Wuxian with further questions. "So will Rich-gege come again?"

Wei Wuxian only continued to smile. It was a while before he answered.

"Probably not."

"Why not?" Wen Yuan was disappointed.

"No reason," Wei Wuxian said. "Everyone has their own things to do out in the world, and their own paths to walk. Our house is busy enough. How would we have time to concern ourselves with other people's families?"

After all, they were not traveling on the same road.

Although he did not quite understand, Wen Yuan still replied with an "Oh."

He looked rather down. Wei Wuxian scooped him up and tucked him under his arm.

"…Who cares about the broad and bustling highway?" He humphed. "*I* prefer to follow the single-plank bridge into the darkness… Into! The! …Into the darkness?"

When he sang out the word "darkness," he suddenly noticed that it wasn't dark at all. The black summit he always returned to was vastly different tonight.

The area around the few little huts had been swept clean; even the weeds had been pulled. Several round, vibrantly red lanterns hung in the nearby woods, dangling from branches. The lanterns were all handmade. While they were simple and crude, they emitted a warm light that illuminated the pitch-black forest.

The fifty-odd people would usually have finished their meals and holed up in their run-down shacks by now, with the lights extinguished. But tonight, they were all gathered in the most spacious hut. That hut, which consisted of a rooftop held up by eight wooden stakes, could accommodate everyone. The small structure next to it was the "kitchen," so this had become the dining hall.

Wei Wuxian, finding the sight strange, walked over with Wen Yuan under his arm. "Why is everyone here today? Not heading off

to bed? It's so bright with all those lanterns."

Wen Qing walked out of the kitchen, carrying a plate. "The lanterns were hung for *your* sake, oh elder one. Let's make more tomorrow and hang them on the mountain path. It's not easy to find your way around in the dark. You'll trip and break a bone one of these days."

"Come now, even if I break a bone, don't we have you?" Wei Wuxian said.

"I certainly don't want to do extra work. It's not like I get paid for it," Wen Qing shot back. "If you *do* break a limb, don't blame me for bruising you when I set it."

Wei Wuxian shuddered and swiftly crept away. As he walked into the hut, the people inside quickly made room for him. There were three tables, each laden with seven or eight steaming hot plates of freshly cooked food.

"What, you guys haven't eaten yet?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Nah. We were waiting for you," Wen Qing answered.

"Why are you waiting for me? I already ate," Wei Wuxian said.

As soon as he spoke, he realized he'd made a mistake. Sure enough, Wen Qing slammed a plate onto the table, and the red chili peppers sprinkled over the vegetables bounced with the impact.

"No wonder you didn't buy anything. You spent everything at a restaurant, didn't you?" Wen Qing raged. "I've only got so much money, and I gave it all to you. Look at how carefree you are with your spending!"

"No! I didn't…" Wei Wuxian tried explaining himself.

Just then, Granny Wen shakily hobbled out of the kitchen, leaning on her cane and clutching a plate in her free hand. Wen Yuan wriggled and squirmed out from under Wei Wuxian's arm, then ran over.

"Granny!"

Wen Qing turned around to help her, complaining all the while. "I told you not to worry about helping bring the plates out. Just sit, you don't have to help. It's smoky in there. Your legs are bad and your hands aren't steady; if you drop a plate, we don't have many left. It's not easy transporting those wares up the mountain…"

The other cultivators busied themselves with setting out chopsticks and pouring tea, saving the head seat for Wei Wuxian. Seeing them like this made him feel uncomfortable about accepting the gesture.

Over the past few months, he had been fully aware that the Wens were somewhat afraid of him. These people had heard of his vicious name and his insane deeds during the Sunshot Campaign. They had heard the widespread rumors of the savage, evil ways he took his anger out on people. With their own eyes, they had seen him order corpses to murder the living. In the beginning, old Granny Wen's legs would shudder nonstop whenever she saw him, and Wen Yuan would hide behind her. It was many days before he dared to slowly approach him.

But now, those same fifty pairs of eyes were watching him. Although there was still some fear in their gazes, it was the sort of fear attached to respect and reverence. Their eyes also carried a trace of cautiousness, and some intent to ingratiate themselves. However, it was by and large the same gratitude and goodwill that shone in the eyes of the Wen siblings.

"Thank you for everything you've done, all this time," Wen Qing said quietly.

"You…are suddenly being nice to me. I'm kind of scared?" Wei Wuxian said.

Wen Qing's knuckles seemed to briefly crack, and Wei Wuxian immediately shut up. However, she continued her quiet speech.

"…They've always wanted to have a meal with you, and to thank you. But you're always busy running around or locking yourself up in the Demon-Quelling Cave for days and telling

everyone you're not to be disturbed. They were afraid they would distract you from your work or bother you. They thought you didn't like to mingle with people and that you didn't want to talk to them, so they didn't want to pester you with any attempts at conversation. When A-Ning woke up today, Si-shu said we had to make you sit down for a feast, no matter what… So just sit down, even if you stuffed yourself to bursting earlier today. It's fine even if you don't eat. Just sit and chat, have a drink, and that'll be enough."

Wei Wuxian was struck silent. Then his eyes lit up. "Drink? There's booze up here?"

The elder Wens had been watching them nervously, but as soon as they heard him say that, one immediately responded.

"Yeah, yeah. There's drink." He passed Wei Wuxian several tightly sealed jugs that had been sitting on the table. "It's fruit wine. Made from wild fruits picked on the mountain. It's got some real body to it!"

"Si-shu also loves to drink," Wen Ning said from where he was crouching by the table. "He knows how to make wine and made those specially for tonight's dinner. He tried for many days."

Because he now spoke so slowly, one word at a time, he did not stutter. Si-shu gave an abashed smile but continued to nervously stare at Wei Wuxian.

"Is that so?" Wei Wuxian said. "Then I gotta give it a try!"

He sat down at the table, and Si-shu immediately opened a sealed jug and passed it to him with both hands. Wei Wuxian sniffed it and smiled.

"It *does* have a pretty nice body!"

The others sat down along with him. After hearing his praise, smiles split their faces as if they had been greatly commended, and they dug in with their chopsticks.

For the very first time, Wei Wuxian paid no attention to the wine's flavor.

He thought to himself, *Follow the path into the darkness…huh?*

It wasn't all *that* dark.

Suddenly, he felt refreshed and alive.

Fifty people were crammed around three tables, their chopsticks darting here and there. Wen Yuan sat on his grandmother's lap and showed off his new treasures, sparring with the little wooden saber and the little wooden sword for her to see. The old woman was smiling so hard her toothless gums could be seen. Wei Wuxian and Si-shu were locked in heated conversation, sharing their experience with various wines. In the end, they unanimously agreed that the famous Gusu brew, Emperor's Smile, was the uncontested best of all. Wen Qing circled around, pouring fruit wine for the family elders and their subordinates. After only two rounds, the jugs were emptied.

"How is it gone already? I haven't even drunk that much!" Wei Wuxian protested.

"There are a few more jugs," Wen Qing said. "But save those and drink them slowly. Don't drink any more today."

"Well, that's not gonna happen." Wei Wuxian said. "As the saying goes, better a good cup of wine today than posthumous fame tomorrow. Don't say any more: fill 'er up, thanks."

Today was special, so Wen Qing filled his cup. "There is no next time. I really think you need to lay off the liquor in general. You drink way too much."

"This isn't the Cloud Recesses, there will be no abstaining from booze!" Wei Wuxian exclaimed.

At the mention of the Cloud Recesses, Wen Qing cast a glance at Wei Wuxian. "I forgot to ask," she began, apparently casual. "You've never brought anyone to the Burial Mounds before. What happened today?"

"You mean Lan Zhan?" Wei Wuxian asked. "I ran into him on the street."

"Ran into him? Ran into him how? Was it a chance encounter?" Wen Qing asked.

"Yeah."

"What a coincidence," Wen Qing commented. "I recall the two of you also met by chance in Yunmeng."

"Nothing strange about it," Wei Wuxian said. "Cultivators from other clans frequently roam Yunmeng and Yiling."

"I heard you calling him by his birth name. Pretty bold, aren't you?" Wen Qing said.

"Didn't he call me by *my* birth name too?" Wei Wuxian said. "It's nothing. A habit from when we were young. Neither of us care about that sort of thing."

"Oh? Don't you two have a bad relationship? Incompatible as fire and water, everyone says. Always fighting on sight."

"That's just idle gossip," Wei Wuxian said. "It's true we didn't have a great relationship in the past, and we did get in a few fights during the Sunshot Campaign, when our tempers ran hot. But these days, it's not as bad as the rumors would have you think. We're on okay terms, I guess."

Wen Qing gave no further comment.

The group quickly polished off the dishes. Someone tapped on their bowl and called out.

"Hey, A-Ning, go make a few more dishes, won't you?"

"Make lots, get a big tub to put it all in!"

"Where are you gonna get a tub? The ones we have are for face-washing!"

Wen Ning didn't need to eat, so he had been guarding the hut. He belatedly heeded the call. "Oh, okay."

Wei Wuxian, seeing a chance to show off his skills, quickly cut in. "Stop. Let me cook! Let me, let me!"

Wen Qing was dubious. “You know how to cook?”

Wei Wuxian arched his brows. “But of course. I can both host the halls and work the kitchens.[4] Watch me. Just you wait.”

The group clapped in anticipation. When Wei Wuxian returned and served up two dishes with a sinister look on his face, Wen Qing gave him a warning after taking only a single glance at them.

“You better stay the hell away from the kitchen in the future.”

“C’mon, try a bite. You can’t judge it by how it looks,” Wei Wuxian defended himself. “Try a bite and you’ll know it’s good. This is the flavor.”

“Try a bite, my ass!” Wen Qing rebuked. “A-Yuan just ate some and now he’s a crying mess! What a waste of food. Everyone, don’t pick up your chopsticks, he doesn’t deserve the honor!”

— Part 2 —

IT ONLY TOOK THREE days for the cultivation world to learn the frightening news: Wei Wuxian, the man who had defected from the Jiang Clan and established his own sect on the peaks of Yiling, had refined a fierce corpse of the highest caliber ever achieved. It moved quickly, boasted extraordinary strength, and had no fear. Its movements were brutal and ruthless, and its mind was intact and capable of higher thought. It was invincible on Night Hunts!

The people were alarmed—they had lost their hard-won peace! For they were certain Wei Wuxian was plotting to mass-produce this variety of fierce corpse, all in the name of fueling his vain attempts of founding a sect and establishing his supremacy over the other clans! The fresh, young blood of the cultivation world would surely be lured by his wicked, opportunistic arts to join his ranks. Clans who adhered to righteous, orthodox ways would face troubled futures, their prospects growing dark!

In reality, having succeeded in refining such a corpse, Wei Wuxian felt the biggest benefit was gaining a manual laborer who could transport goods up the mountain willingly and without complaint. He could only carry a single case of goods at most, while Wen Ning could single-handedly tow an entire cart's worth—plus Wei Wuxian himself, who perched idly atop that cart with his legs crossed.

But no one believed this. After stealing the show at several Night Hunts, quite a few people came knocking, drawn by admiration of his reputation and in hopes of joining the "Grandmaster" to become disciples under his banner. The once-desolate and barren mountain suddenly had a front door that was as busy as any market's.

None of the fierce corpses Wei Wuxian had ordered to patrol the foot of the mountain actively attacked anyone—the most they

did was hurl them away with teeth bared in a snarl. No one was ever hurt. And so, more and more people crowded at the foot of the Burial Mounds. Wei Wuxian once saw a long pennant in the distance, emblazoned with the title "The Supreme Evil Yiling Patriarch," and spat out an entire mouthful of fruit wine at the sight.

He couldn't take it anymore. He descended the mountain, unapologetically accepted all the offerings that were presented to him as a "show of respect to the grandest of all grandmasters," and started using a different route to get around from then on.

One fateful day, he was out shopping in Yiling with his trusty worker in tow when he suddenly spotted a familiar figure at the intersection of the alley and road ahead. Wei Wuxian squinted, then silently followed after the person. As he and Wen Ning followed, they darted into a small courtyard. As soon as they entered, the gates shut behind them.

A cold voice spoke. "Get out."

Jiang Cheng was standing behind them. He was the one who had closed the door, and his words were directed at Wen Ning.

Jiang Cheng was the sort to hold grudges. His hatred for the Wen Clan of Qishan ran deep and included every last member of the family. He had neither empathy nor a sense of indebtedness when it came to Wen Qing and Wen Ning, since he had been unconscious for the entirety of the time that they had rescued and healed him. He simply could not share Wei Wuxian's feelings on the matter, which was why he was impolite to Wen Ning—and also why he had showed no mercy during their previous encounter.

When Wen Ning saw it was Jiang Cheng, he immediately lowered his head and retreated.

A woman stood inside the courtyard, wearing a veiled bamboo hat and black mantle cape. Wei Wuxian felt a lump in his throat.

"…Shijie," he called.

Hearing his footsteps, the woman turned around and removed her hat and mantle. There was a bright red wedding robe underneath.

Jiang Yanli stood before him dressed in her dignified bridal best, her face bright and vibrant with powdered blush. Wei Wuxian took a few steps toward her.

"Shijie… What are you…?"

"What is she what? You think she's marrying you?" Jiang Cheng said.

"You shut up," Wei Wuxian said.

Jiang Yanli opened her arms wide to show him her dress, her cheeks flushing pink. "A-Xian, I'm…I'm about to get married! I've come to show you how I look…"

Wei Wuxian felt the rims of his eyes grow hot.

He couldn't be present on the day of Jiang Yanli's marriage. He wouldn't be allowed to see his own family dressed in bridal finery. So Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli had hurried over to Yiling in secret and lured him into this courtyard for the sole purpose of showing him what his sister would look like on the day of her wedding.

It was a good moment before Wei Wuxian smiled. "I know! I heard about it…"

"Who'd you hear it from?" Jiang Cheng questioned.

"What do you care?" Wei Wuxian shot back.

"But…it's only me," Jiang Yanli said abashedly. "You won't get to see the groom."

Wei Wuxian put on a disdainful look. "Well, I don't care about seeing some groom." He circled around Jiang Yanli twice and then praised, "Looking beautiful!"

"Jie, I told you so," Jiang Cheng said. "You really do look beautiful."

Jiang Yanli, who had always been rather self-aware, said soberly, "It doesn't count if *you're* the ones saying it. You two can't be taken seriously."

Jiang Cheng was exasperated. "You don't believe me, and you don't believe him either. Will you only believe it when what's-his-face says it? Hmm?"

Jiang Yanli flushed harder at his words, the blush reaching her pearly white earlobes. Not even the pink of the rouge could hide it. She quickly changed the subject.

"A-Xian…pick a courtesy name."

"Pick what courtesy name?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"The courtesy name of my not-yet-born nephew," said Jiang Cheng.

The wedding hadn't even taken place yet and he already had to think of a courtesy name for his future nephew? Wei Wuxian didn't find this odd in the least, however, and he didn't hold back. It only took a moment of thought for him to settle on an answer.

"All right. The character for the next generation of the Jin Clan of Lanling is 'ru.'[5] How about Jin Rulan, for 'like an orchid'?"

"Sure!" Jiang Yanli said.

"No. That sounds like the 'lan' of the Lan Clan," Jiang Cheng protested. "Why does the scion of the Jin Clan of Lanling and the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng have to be 'like a Lan'?"

"What's wrong with the Lans?" Wei Wuxian asked. "The orchid is the gentleman among flowers; the Lan family are gentlemen among men. It's a good name."

"That's certainly not what you said in the past," Jiang Cheng said.

"She's asking *me* to come up with a name, not you. What're you being all picky for?"

Jiang Yanli quickly intervened. "All right. You know how A-Cheng is. He was the one who gave me the idea to have you pick the courtesy name in the first place, you know? Stop your quarreling. I brought soup for both of you, so wait a second."

She went inside the house attached to the courtyard to retrieve a pot. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng exchanged a look. Moments later, Jiang Yanli emerged to hand each of them a bowl before going back inside. She brought out another bowl, smaller than the first two, and walked to the front gate to address Wen Ning.

"There were no other bowls left except for this little one, I'm sorry. This is for you."

Wen Ning had been guarding the gate with his head down, but her gesture overwhelmed him with the unexpected favor and set him stuttering again. "Ah… I…I get one too?"

Jiang Cheng was unhappy. "How come he gets soup too?"

"I brought enough for everyone to have a share," Jiang Yanli stated.

"Thank you, Miss Jiang… Thank you," Wen Ning said softly.

He clutched the small bowl, which brimmed with soup ladled into it just for him, and didn't have the heart to say, *"Thank you, but I can't eat this."* Giving a portion to him was a waste, as the dead could not eat. Jiang Yanli noticed his discomfort. She asked him a few questions on the topic, then started chatting with him outside the gate.

Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng were still standing inside the courtyard. Jiang Cheng raised his bowl.

"To the Yiling Patriarch."

Hearing the title reminded Wei Wuxian of that long pennant fluttering shamelessly in the wind, and his mind was filled with its huge dazzling words: "The Supreme Evil Yiling Patriarch."

"Shut up!" he said.

Jiang Cheng took a sip from his bowl, then asked, "How's your injury from last time?"

"It healed a long time ago," Wei Wuxian replied.

"Hmm." After a pause, Jiang Cheng asked, "How long did it take?"

"Less than seven days," Wei Wuxian said. "I told you, something like that is no big deal with Wen Qing around. But I can't believe you fucking stabbed me for real."

Jiang Cheng ate a piece of lotus root. "You made him crush my arm first. It took *you* seven days to heal, but my arm was in a sling for over a month."

Wei Wuxian snickered. "It wouldn't be believable if I wasn't brutal. It was your left hand, anyway, it wouldn't have stopped you from writing. It takes a hundred days for broken bones and pulled muscles to heal, so they say. Even three months would have been normal."

They could faintly hear Wen Ning's stammered responses from the courtyard's entrance. After some silence, Jiang Cheng asked a question.

"You're gonna stay like this from now on? Do you have any plans?"

"None at the moment," Wei Wuxian replied. "They're all too scared to descend the mountain, but no one dares mess with me when *I* head down. It'll be fine as long as I don't actively invite trouble."

"Actively?" Jiang Cheng sneered. "Wei Wuxian, believe it or not, trouble comes knocking at your door even when uninvited. And while there's often no way to save someone, there are thousands of ways to harm them."

Wei Wuxian was engrossed in eating his soup. "One brawny brute can take down ten skilled martial artists. I'll kill whoever comes."

"You never heed any of my advice." Jiang Cheng said quietly. "There'll come a day when you'll understand that I'm right."

He finished the rest of his soup in a single mouthful and stood. "Impressive. Amazing. As expected of the Yiling Patriarch."

Wei Wuxian spat out a piece of bone. "Are you done?"

As they got ready to depart, Jiang Cheng said, "Don't bother sending us off. We don't want anyone to spot us."

Wei Wuxian nodded. He knew it hadn't been easy for the Jiang siblings to make this trip. If anyone saw them, the act they'd put on for the rest of the world would be for naught.

"We'll leave first," he said.

Once they left the alleyway, Wei Wuxian still walked ahead while Wen Ning trailed quietly behind. All of a sudden, Wei Wuxian turned to ask a question.

"Why are you still holding that bowl of soup?"

"Huh? To bring it back… I can't drink it, but I can give it to someone else…" Wen Ning explained, unwilling to let go of the bowl.

"…Whatever you want," Wei Wuxian said. "Hold on tight; don't spill it."

He turned back around. Deep down, he knew it would probably be a long time before he could reunite with those he'd once known so well.

But…he would soon be reunited with others he also knew well, wouldn't he?

Chapter 18:
Night Flight

— Part 1 —

INSIDE THE LARGEST Pavilion of Treasures in Lanling City, countless top-grade spiritual jades and weapons of the highest quality formed a dazzling display within the charming asymmetrical compartments of the lattice shelves. Innumerable cultivators were browsing the shop's wares, meticulously comparing items and considering prices. Those with time to spare engaged in idle chitchat for a few minutes.

"Cultivation Chief?" someone said. "Seems like several major clans have been arguing about that topic as of late. Have they reached an agreement?"

"What's there to argue about? They can't possibly continue being leaderless and racked by discord. I don't think it's a bad idea to name a head cultivator, one who will supervise and lead the various clans."

"Well, *I* don't think it's a good idea. If we get another Wen Clan of Qishan…"

"How is that the same thing? The Cultivation Chief will be elected by the clans. It's not the same at all. Not the same."

"Heh, they may *call* it an election, but everyone knows it all comes down to the same few people jockeying for the position. Do others even stand a chance?"

"Chifeng-zun vehemently objects to it, doesn't he? How many times has he rebuffed Jin Guangshan's overt *and* covert hints now? They've still got time to grind each other down."

"Besides, only one person can occupy the position of Cultivation Chief. On the off chance the proposition goes through, they'll probably be fighting for several more years about who gets the spot."

"Either way, it's something for those at the top to worry about. None of our business. Small fry like us have no say in the matter."

Someone else changed the subject. "Who here attended the Cloud Recesses' opening ceremony for their Library Pavilion last month? I went and was surprised to see the new building is an exact replica of the original. That must've been difficult to pull off."

"Indeed. Such a vast abode, such a transcendent, centuries-old realm. It wasn't a task to be approached in haste."

"Come to think of it, there have been many joyous occasions lately."

"You're talking about Jin Zixuan's son's seventh-day celebration? They filled the place with bright colors and fancy things, but the child didn't like any of it and cried hard enough to bring down Pageantry Hall. Instead, he kept giggling when he saw his father's sword, Suihua. That certainly delighted his parents. Everyone's saying he'll be an outstanding swordsman in the future."

Not far away, a man in white was examining a tasseled jade pendant. He smiled upon hearing the words.

A cultivator woman's voice rang out. "Young Madam Jin really is blessed… She must have forsaken ascension to heaven in her past life to garner such good fortune today."

"Looks like all the talent and skill in the world means nothing compared to being born into a good family," her female companion commented. "She's obviously nothing special…"

The man in white frowned slightly. Fortunately, that little sour-grapes remark was promptly drowned out by another loud voice.

"As expected of the Jin Clan of Lanling. Even the celebration for a week-old infant is ostentatious."

"Are you forgetting who the baby's parents are? Do you think they can afford to be slapdash about this? Not only would Young Madam Jin's husband refuse to do a sloppy job, neither her mother-in-law nor her younger brother would accept the celebration being even a tad more subdued. The one-month celebration that's coming up in a few days will be even more extravagant."

"Speaking of which, did you know that they apparently invited…a *certain someone* to the one-month celebration?"

"Who?"

"Wei Wuxian!"

A brief silence descended on the Pavilion of Treasures.

"Huh… I thought that was just a baseless rumor?" someone asked in disbelief. "Don't tell me they really invited him?!"

"They did! It was just confirmed that Wei Wuxian will be in attendance."

"What in the world is the Jin Clan of Lanling thinking?" another said incredulously. "Have they forgotten how he indiscriminately murdered innocents at Qiongqi Path?"

"Now that they've invited someone like him, who would dare attend Jin Ling's one-month celebration? *I* definitely wouldn't."

A number of people mentally mocked his words. *You're never even going to be invited, so why are you worrying about going or not?!*

The man in white's brows quirked. He selected and paid for his purchase, then stepped out of the Pavilion of Treasures. Only a few steps later, he turned into an alley. A figure dressed in black emerged.

"Gongzi, have you finished your shopping?"

Wei Wuxian tossed him the exquisite sandalwood box he had been holding. Wen Ning caught and opened it and was greeted by the sight of a white jade pendant decorated with a dangling tassel.

Soft light glowed and gleamed through the translucent stone, almost as if it were alive.

"How pretty!" he exclaimed in delight.

"This pretty little thing wasn't cheap," Wei Wuxian said. "Your big sister's money was barely enough to buy this after getting a set of new clothes. Either way, every last penny's been spent. I'm prepared to get chewed out when we make it back."

"She won't, she won't," Wen Ning hurriedly said. "Jiejie won't scold you for getting Miss Jiang's child a gift."

"Remember that statement in the future," Wei Wuxian said. "You'll have to cover for me if she does."

Wen Ning nodded. "The little young master Jin Ling is sure to love this gift."

However, Wei Wuxian said, "*That's* not the gift I'm going to give him. It's just a bauble. What good are any of the trinkets from the Pavilion of Treasures, other than as eye candy?"

Wen Ning was taken aback. "Then what gift did gongzi prepare?"

"Heaven's secrets cannot be divulged," Wei Wuxian said enigmatically.

"Oh," Wen Ning said in reply.

And he did not ask again. Wei Wuxian held his tongue for a moment but then could hold it in no longer.

"Wen Ning, shouldn't you keep pestering me for an answer out of burning curiosity? How can you just stop after a mere *oh*? Don't you want to know what the gift is?!"

Wen Ning stared blankly at him until it finally clicked. "…Yes, I do! Gongzi! What exactly did you prepare?"

Only then did Wei Wuxian produce a small wooden box from his sleeve. He smiled as he waved it in front of Wen Ning, who accepted the box and opened it to take a look.

"Such an impressive silver bell!" he blurted.

"Impressive" did not refer to its exquisite craftsmanship, though its pure silver color and the lifelike nine-petaled lotus etched on its body could be praised as the pinnacle of artistic perfection. What made Wen Ning marvel was the powerful energy contained in the tiny silver bell.

"Gongzi," Wen Ning said. "Is this what you were making when you locked yourself up in the Demon-Quelling Cave for over a month?"

"That's right," Wei Wuxian said. "As long as that nephew of mine carries this silver bell, not a single low-level evil creature can even think about getting close to him. You can't touch it; it'll affect you too."

Wen Ning nodded. "I can feel it."

Wei Wuxian took the tasseled jade pendant and secured it to the silver bell. The two complemented each other well, creating an aesthetically pleasing sight. He was very satisfied.

"But," Wen Ning said, "since you're attending little young master Jin Ling's full-month celebration, you have to hold yourself back when you see Miss Jiang's husband. Don't get into a fight with him…"

Wei Wuxian waved him off. "Relax. I know not to go too far. Seeing as Jin Zixuan was the one who invited me this time, I won't say anything bad about him for a year."

Wen Ning scratched his head and said with some embarrassment, "When Jin-gongzi sent someone to the foot of the Burial Mounds to deliver the invitation, I was sure it must be a trap. But it turns out it was just a misunderstanding. I was being unfair. You can't tell by looking at him, but Jin-gongzi is a good person…"

At high noon, they passed through Qiongqi Path.

Qiongqi Path had been renamed after its reconstruction. Wei Wuxian had no idea what it was called now, and it seemed no one

else could remember either, so it was still called Qiongqi Path most of the time.

At first, neither of them sensed anything odd. But as they approached the heart of the valley, Wei Wuxian began to feel that something was amiss.

There should have been more people around.

"Sense anything peculiar?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Wen Ning rolled his eyes back to reveal the whites. After a moment, he rolled them down once more. "No," he answered. "It's so quiet."

"Indeed. It's a tad too quiet," Wei Wuxian said.

His ears couldn't pick up even a trace of the cacophony of inhuman noises he usually heard.

On the alert now, Wei Wuxian hissed under his breath, "Go!"

He had only just turned around when Wen Ning suddenly raised his hand and intercepted an object.

It was a feathered arrow that had been aimed straight at Wei Wuxian's heart!

Wei Wuxian shot his head up, only to see hordes of people emerging onto the cliffs on both sides of the valley. There were about three hundred of them, and although some wore the uniforms of other clans, the majority wore uniforms emblazoned with the Sparks Amidst Snow symbol. All were geared up and armed to the teeth—longbows on their backs, swords at their waists, and wary expressions on their faces. Using both the mountainous terrain and their fellow cultivators as cover, they aimed their countless swords and arrows directly at him.

The arrow had been fired by the person leading this ambush. Taking a closer look, Wei Wuxian saw the leader was a tall man with a dark complexion and handsome features that looked familiar.

"Who are you?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Having loosed the arrow, the man had fully intended to make a speech. Faced with this question, he forgot all about that plan and dissolved into a rage.

"The nerve of you to ask me who I am! I'm Jin Zixun!"

Wei Wuxian remembered now. This was Jin Zixuan's cousin, whom he had seen twice before.

His heart sank to the pit of his stomach. He had been on his way to attend the full-month celebration of Jiang Yanli's son, brimming with joy—and now that joyous mood had dispersed like smoke, replaced by gloom and shadow. But he didn't want to dwell too deeply on the situation. He didn't want to speculate why these people had been lying in wait to ambush him.

"Wei Wuxian," Jin Zixun shouted at the top of his voice. "I'm warning you. Undo the evil curse you cast on me at once, and I will pretend this never happened."

Hearing this, Wei Wuxian was stunned. Though he knew it would be taken as denial, he still had to ask for clarification.

"What evil curse?" he blurted.

Sure enough, Jin Zixun thought he was deliberately asking what he already knew.

"How dare you still play dumb?!" He suddenly yanked his collar open and roared at him, "Fine! I'll show you *exactly* what evil curse it is!"

Jin Zixun's chest was densely pockmarked with craters of all sizes!

In fact, they were evenly distributed all over his body. The smaller holes were the size of sesame seeds, while the larger ones were as large as soybeans. It was a sight fit to make one shiver.

Wei Wuxian only took a single glance. "Thousand Sores and Hundred Holes?"

"That's right!" Jin Zixun said. "It's the Thousand Sores and Hundred Holes!"

The "Thousand Sores and Hundred Holes" was an incredibly malicious and vicious curse.

Long ago, back when he was supposed to be transcribing lines at the Lan Library Pavilion, Wei Wuxian had found an ancient book while rummaging through the stacks. The section that detailed this kind of curse was accompanied by an illustration. The expression of the person in the picture was calm, as if he felt no pain, but many black holes the size of coins had already developed on his body.

At first, the victim would feel nothing. Many would simply assume their pores had grown coarser than before. But before long, those tiny holes would grow to the size of sesame seeds—and they would continue to grow and grow. The craters would widen and proliferate until the victim's entire body was covered in holes of all sizes. In the latter stages of the curse, the victim would resemble a living sieve. It was horrifying beyond belief.

Once the victim's body was fully consumed by sores, the curse would begin to fester beneath the skin. The best outcome at this point was unbearable abdominal pain, while the worst was the ulceration of vital organs!

To think Jin Zixun had fallen victim to such a repulsive and difficult-to-dispel curse… Wei Wuxian felt a moment of surprising sympathy for him. But though he sympathized, he still considered Jin Zixun a fool.

"So you were cursed with the Thousand Sores and Hundred Holes. But what do you intend by this ambush? What's that curse got to do with me?"

Jin Zixun, who also seemed disgusted by the sight of his own chest, covered himself back up. "Who else would curse me with such a vicious and malicious spell? Who, other than a treacherous crook like you, who's used to employing such deviant arts?"

Oh, there are plenty of people who'd do that to you, Wei Wuxian thought. *Don't tell me Jin Zixun considers himself a popular guy?*

But he didn't want to aggravate the situation by saying that aloud so bluntly and enraging Jin Zixun even further. Instead, he said, "Jin Zixun, I don't play these underhanded games. When I want to kill someone, I make sure everyone knows that they died by my hand. Besides, if I really wanted you to die, you would look a thousand times worse than you do now."

"Aren't you always running wild?" Jin Zixun said. "And now you're scared to admit what you've done?!"

"I'm not the one who did it," Wei Wuxian answered, "so why should I admit to anything?"

A murderous glint flashed in Jin Zixun's eyes. "Words before blows. Since you're unwilling to repent, I won't go easy on you!"

Wei Wuxian stopped in his tracks. "Oh?"

It was obvious what he meant by "won't go easy."

There were two ways to lift the Thousand Sores and Hundred Holes curse. The one who cast the curse could dispel it themselves, though the effort of doing so would severely damage their own cultivation.

There was also another, simpler solution.

Kill the one who cast the curse!

"'Won't go easy on me'? *You?*" Wei Wuxian said contemptuously. "With just these few hundred people you brought along?"

Jin Zixun waved his arm, and all the disciples nocked their arrows and took aim at where Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning stood in the lowest point of the valley. Wei Wuxian raised Chenqing as well, and the shrill sound of his flute tore sharply through the silent valley.

Yet after a brief silence, there was no response.

"We cleared out the entire area to prepare for your arrival," Jin Zixun said. "No matter how many times you play that thing, you'll summon no helpers. This place is a grave that we've meticulously prepared just for you!"

Wei Wuxian sneered. "You're asking for it!"

As soon as he spoke, Wen Ning reached out and snapped the red string tied around his own neck, releasing the talisman it secured. The instant the red string broke, he swayed. The muscles on his face began to contort, and strange black cracks appeared on his skin, crawling up his neck to his cheeks. All of a sudden, he tilted his head back and let loose a long, inhuman roar!

There was no shortage of Night Hunt veterans among the three hundred-odd people who had lain in ambush here. But none of them had ever heard a fierce corpse make such a horrifying sound before, and it made them all go simultaneously weak at the knees.

Jin Zixun, too, felt a chill crawl up his spine. He raised his arm and shouted an order. "Release the arrows!"

And arrows rained down in a torrent!

Wen Ning tore a boulder apart with his bare hands and raised it high to block the barrage. When the volley of arrows, over a hundred cultivators leapt from the cliff and charged at the two men in the middle of the valley. Wei Wuxian took several steps back and quickly dodged an incoming sneak attack from the point of a sword.

While Wen Ning was busy dealing with the hundred attackers, Jin Zixun seized the chance to strike. He laughed aloud when he saw that Wei Wuxian did not have a sword with him, only a flute that was temporarily useless.

"This is the price of your arrogance. Let's see how well you do without a sword!"

With a flick of his hand, Wei Wuxian hurled forth a row of talismans that burned with green flames, dulling Jin Zixun's sword glare. His laugh interrupted, a startled Jin Zixun hurriedly focused on

dealing with the attack. As the two of them fought one-on-one, something suddenly flew from Wei Wuxian's sleeve. His gaze locked on it, and a sense of dread overtook him.

It was the gift he had prepared for Jin Ling. He treasured it far too dearly, had feared he would accidentally break it if he stuffed it somewhere carelessly and had also wanted to take it out and admire it from time to time on the trip. And so, he had kept it easily accessible in his sleeve pocket. In the middle of this intense battle, it had slipped loose and been sent flying toward Jin Zixun.

Jin Zixun initially intended to dodge, thinking it was a concealed weapon, poison, or some other wicked ploy, but he changed his mind on seeing the drastic change in Wei Wuxian's expression and caught the item as it flew.

It was a small, exquisite wooden box. There was a line of small characters carved on it—Jin Ling's name, as well as the eight characters corresponding to his date and time of birth.

Jin Zixun was stunned at first, but when he realized what it was, he burst out laughing.

Wei Wuxian's face grew grim. He spoke each word of his demand slowly and clearly. "Give. It. Back."

Jin Zixun held up the little wooden box. "A present for A-Ling?" he mocked.

Wen Ning was a short distance ahead of them, fighting a hundred men on his own and killing with wild abandon.

"You don't *really* think you would be allowed to attend A-Ling's full-month celebration banquet, do you?" Jin Zixun said.

His words made Wei Wuxian's hands tremble.

Just then, a voice bellowed, "All of you, *stop immediately*!"

A figure dressed in white leapt down from atop the mountain valley, landing light as a feather. He stood between Wei Wuxian and Jin Zixun.

"Zixuan?!" Jin Zixun blurted when he saw who it was. "Why are you here?"

Jin Zixuan set one hand on the hilt of the sword at his waist. "Why do you *think* I'm here?!" he demanded furiously.

"Where's A-Yao?" Jin Zixun asked.

He had originally planned for Jin Guangyao to be present to back him up. Only a year ago, he had despised Jin Guangyao and regarded him with considerable contempt, but their relationship had since improved. It was no longer quite as strained as it had once been, which was why he now referred to Jin Guangyao in much more intimate terms.

"I detained him at Golden Carp Tower," Jin Zixuan replied. "If I hadn't noticed his odd expression and called him out, were you both going to move forward with this absurd plot? Why didn't you tell me that you'd been cursed with the Thousand Sores and Hundred Holes? You'd rather do something like *this* than just speak up?!"

Being cursed with the Thousand Sores and Hundred Holes was indeed a difficult subject for Jin Zixun to broach. His face and physique had always been comely, and he'd always prided himself on cutting a fine figure. He couldn't bear the idea of anyone knowing he'd been afflicted with such a disgusting, unsightly curse. Additionally, the fact that a curse had been successfully laid upon him in the first place meant his cultivation was lacking and his spiritual defenses were weak—which made it all the more difficult for him to come clean about the situation. As such, he had only confided in Jin Guangshan about his predicament and pleaded with him to find the best doctors and masters of esoteric spells. But, as it turned out, not a single one of them could do a thing to help.

Jin Ling's one-month celebration banquet had coincidentally been just around the corner, and Jin Zixuan unexpectedly took the initiative to invite Wei Wuxian. Jin Guangshan, none too pleased by this, had suggested Jin Zixun take the opportunity and intercept Wei

Wuxian on his way to the banquet and kill him. That way, they wouldn't need to welcome him to Golden Carp Tower.

Wei Wuxian was Jiang Yanli's shidi, and Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan were an affectionate couple. Jin Zixuan had a tendency to tell his wife about almost every little thing, regardless of how trivial it was. Those in the know were worried that he might leak the plan and cause Wei Wuxian to abandon his trip, so they kept him in the dark. Uncharitable behavior, when all was said and done.

Seeing that their plot had been uncovered, Jin Zixun's conscience pricked him with a measure of guilt. But at the end of the day, he valued his life. "Zixuan, keep this from my sister-in-law for now. Once I get rid of these things on me, I'll come apologize and make amends to you both!"

The last time Wei Wuxian saw Jin Zixuan, the latter had still had the proud air of youth. Now that he had settled down with a wife and a child, he seemed to have matured significantly. His tone was forceful as he said, with a dark look on his face, "There is still time to salvage this situation. All of you, stay your hands."

Jin Zixun was both furious and agitated. "What's there to salvage at this point? Do you not see these things all over me?!"

Seeing that he was about to yank open his clothes and reveal his hole-riddled chest again, Jin Zixuan hurriedly ordered him otherwise. "*No need!* I already heard about it from Jin Guangyao!"

"Then you should know that I can't wait," Jin Zixun said. "Don't tell me you're going to turn a blind eye while your own kin's life hangs in the balance, all for the sake of my sister-in-law's shidi?!"

"You know very well that I'm not that kind of person!" Jin Zixuan rebuffed. "He might not even be the one who cursed you with the Thousand Sores and Hundred Holes to begin with. Why are you so impatient?! I was the one who invited Wei Wuxian to attend A-Ling's one-month celebration banquet. When you people act like this, where does that leave me? Where does that leave my wife?"

Jin Zixun raised his voice. "It's best if he doesn't attend! Just who *is* Wei Wuxian, anyway? Is he even worthy of attending our family's banquet?! Whoever touches him will be stained just as black! Zixuan—when you invited him, weren't you afraid that you, my sister-in-law, and A-Ling would be marred by an indelible stain for the rest of your lives?!"

"Shut your mouth!" Jin Zixuan bellowed.

Infuriated, Jin Zixun clenched his hand and exerted spiritual force. The little wooden box that contained the silver bell and jade tassel was crushed to pieces in an instant!

Wei Wuxian could only watch as the box and its contents turned to dust. His pupils shrank rapidly, and he struck out toward Jin Zixun with his hand.

Jin Zixuan, however, still did not know what had been inside the box. He raised a hand to intercept the blow, shouting as he did, "Wei Wuxian! Have you not had enough?!"

Wei Wuxian's chest heaved rapidly, and the rims of his eyes were red. Jin Zixuan and Jin Zixun were cousins who had known each other since childhood and shared decades of friendly history. It was indeed ill-advised for Jin Zixuan to take the side of an outsider right now, and he wasn't fond of Wei Wuxian as a person either.

Composing himself, he stated, "Make Wen Ning stop first. Tell him to stop going berserk and aggravating the situation further."

"…Why don't *you* make *them* stop first?" Wei Wuxian's voice was hoarse as he countered.

There was relentless clamor and fighting all around them. Jin Zixuan fumed.

"Why are you still so stubborn at a time like this? Calm down, all of you, and come with me to Golden Carp Tower. We'll talk, deal with the issue honestly, and set the record straight. You'll be fine as long as you weren't the one who did it!"

"So I should make Wen Ning stop?" Wei Wuxian said. "The second I tell him to, arrows will come flying at me and swords will pierce my heart. I'll die without an intact corpse! Go to Golden Carp Tower and talk things over, my foot."

"That won't happen!" Jin Zixuan said.

Wei Wuxian scoffed. "No? And how can you guarantee that? Jin Zixuan, I have a question. When you invited me, did you really not know of their plan to ambush me on the way?"

Stunned, Jin Zixuan furiously responded, "You! Wei Wuxian, you—you're out of your mind!"

Wei Wuxian forced down his towering hatred. "Jin Zixuan, get out of the way," he said coldly. "I won't lay a hand on you, but you better not provoke me."

Seeing him still stubbornly refusing to concede, Jin Zixuan suddenly made a move as if to seize him.

"Why can't you yield even the slightest bit, for once in your life?! A-Li is…"

As he reached out to Wei Wuxian, he heard a strange, dull sound.

The sound was much too close by. Jin Zixuan froze for a moment before looking down. Only then did he see the hand that pierced his chest.

At some point during their argument, Wen Ning had approached. A few fresh drops of hot blood splattered one half of his expressionless face, making for a jarring contrast.

Jin Zixuan's lips moved, his expression a little dumbfounded. But he still insisted on completing his last sentence.

"…still waiting for you at Golden Carp Tower for A-Ling's one-month banquet…"

Wei Wuxian's face was just as dazed as Jin Zixuan's. The reality of what had transpired had yet to sink in.

What happened?

How did things turn like this in the blink of an eye?

That's not right.

It shouldn't be like this.

Something must have gone wrong somewhere.

Wen Ning extracted his right hand from Jin Zixuan's chest, leaving behind a gaping hole where he had run him through.

Jin Zixuan's face twitched in agony. For a brief moment, he seemed to think he might shrug off his wound and keep standing, but his legs gave out in the end and he fell to his knees.

Cries of panic and terror rose and fell around the valley.

"The…the Ghost General has gone berserk!"

"He killed, he killed him… Wei Wuxian ordered the Ghost General to kill Jin Zixuan!"

"Open fire!" Jin Zixun yelled. "What are you people waiting for?! Fire your arrows!"

But the moment he turned around, a black shadow pressed in close to him like an approaching wraith. He felt his throat constrict as a pale hand clutched it in its grip.

"Aaaaaaargh!"

Wei Wuxian stood there, bemused and frozen.

No.

No, he didn't.

He'd clearly had Wen Ning under control earlier.

Even if he'd ordered Wen Ning to go berserk, he should still have been able to maintain control.

He had clearly always been able to control him perfectly.

He hadn't thought about killing Jin Zixuan. Not at all.

He had never intended to kill Jin Zixuan at all! It was just that, for some reason, he'd somehow failed to control Wen Ning in that moment… He had suddenly lost control!

Jin Zixuan's body could finally hold itself up no longer. He leaned forward heavily and toppled over, hitting the ground with a *thud*.

All his life, he had been proud and arrogant. He took great pains to maintain his appearance and demeanor, and was fastidious about cleanliness to the point of seeming terrified of filth. But now, he cut an extremely sorry sight as he fell to the ground with one side of his face planted in the dirt. The fresh blood splattering his face and the vermilion mark at the center of his forehead were the same shade of crimson.

Wei Wuxian's mind was in turmoil. He stared into those eyes as the light slowly faded from them. He had been set adrift in a sea of blood, and screams washed over him ceaselessly from all around. But he could no longer hear any of them.

The only thing he could hear was a voice frantically questioning him inside his head.

Didn't you say you knew what you were doing?

Didn't you say you could keep it under control?

Didn't you say there was absolutely no problem, that nothing would ever go wrong?!

Wei Wuxian's mind went blank. An unknown amount of time later, his eyes suddenly snapped open.

What he saw was the pitch-black domed ceiling of the Demon-Quelling Cave.

Both Wen Qing and Wen Ning were inside the cavern with him.

Wen Ning's pupils had returned to the whites of his eyes, signaling that he had broken free of his berserk state. He seemed to be in the middle of whispering something to Wen Qing. When he

saw Wei Wuxian open his eyes, he fell silent and kneeled on the ground. Wen Qing, whose eyes were red, also did not say a word.

Wei Wuxian sat up. After a moment of silence, a sudden surge of rage and hatred welled up in him, and he kicked Wen Ning in the chest, knocking him over.

Startled, Wen Qing shrank back and clenched her fists, but only lowered her head and pressed her lips together to keep them shut.

"Who did you kill?" Wei Wuxian screamed. "Do you know who you killed?!"

Wen Yuan ran into the cave just then, wearing a straw-woven butterfly on his head. He beamed at Wei Wuxian.

"Xian-gege…"

He had wanted to show Wei Wuxian the new colors he had painted on his butterfly. But having entered the cave, he was faced with the sight of Wen Ning curled up on the ground and Wei Wuxian looking like a fiend. All at once, he was stunned speechless.

Wei Wuxian whipped his head around. He had yet to rein in his emotions, and the expression in his eyes was bone-chilling. Utterly terrified, Wen Yuan jumped in shock. The butterfly slipped from his head and fell to the ground. He burst into tears right then and there.

Si-shu hurried into the cave, back hunched, and carried him out.

Having endured the assault, Wen Ning crawled upright and kneeled once more, not daring to say a word.

Wei Wuxian grabbed him by the collar and yanked him up high. "You could have killed *anyone*," he roared. "Why did you have to kill Jin Zixuan?!"

Wen Qing watched from the side, shedding tears of sorrow and panic. She desperately wanted to step forward and protect her little brother, but forced herself to hold.

"What is shijie supposed to do now that you've killed him?!" Wei Wuxian demanded. "What is shijie's *son* supposed to do?! What am I supposed to do? *What am I supposed to do?!*"

His roars resonated through the Demon-Quelling Cave and echoed outside. Wen Yuan cried even harder at the sound.

Hearing the child wailing from afar, staring at this pair of panic-stricken siblings who were also at a loss for what to do, Wei Wuxian's heart sank further and further into despair.

Why in the world did I have to strand myself at the Burial Mounds for all these years? he asked himself. *Why must I be subjected to all this? Why did I have to go down this path in the first place? Why must I do this to myself? How does everyone else see me? What, exactly, have I gotten out of any of this? Am I crazy? Am I crazy?* Am I crazy*?!*

If only he had never chosen this path to begin with.

All of a sudden, Wen Ning whispered, "…I'm…sorry…"

He was a dead man. His face could form no expression, and his eyes could not redden, much less shed tears. But in this moment, there was genuine anguish on this dead man's face.

"I'm sorry…" he repeated. "It's…it's all my fault… I'm sorry…"

Listening to him stammer as he apologized over and over again, Wei Wuxian suddenly found it beyond ludicrous.

It wasn't Wen Ning's fault at all.

It was his own fault.

Wen Ning was nothing but a weapon while he ran berserk. And it was none other than Wei Wuxian who had created that weapon. Wen Ning heeded his commands, and those commands were his to give.

Back in the valley, the air had crackled with tension and murderous intent. On top of that, he never hesitated to show animosity toward Jin Zixuan in front of Wen Ning. And so when Wen

Ning, locked in a state where he was incapable of conscious thought, saw Jin Zixuan make a move, he recognized him as an enemy. He executed Wei Wuxian's order to kill without a moment's hesitation.

Wei Wuxian was the one who had failed to control his weapon. It was he who had thought too highly of his own abilities. And it was also he who had disregarded all the warning signs, believing he could nip any loss of control in the bud as soon as it began to show.

Wen Ning was a weapon, but had he willingly volunteered for that position?

Could such a weak-willed, timid, stuttering person have taken any pleasure in killing so many people under Wei Wuxian's command?

When Wen Ning received a bowl of lotus root soup from Jiang Yanli, he carried it all the way back up to the peak of the Burial Mounds without spilling a single drop. Although he could not drink it himself, he happily watched someone else do so, even asking about its taste to allow himself to imagine it.

He'd killed Jiang Yanli's husband with his own hands. How could that bring him any joy at all? And still, he took all the blame upon himself, apologizing to Wei Wuxian all the while.

As Wei Wuxian clutched Wen Ning's collar, he stared at his deathly pale, lifeless face. The face of Jin Zixuan, smeared and soiled with dirt and blood, suddenly materialized before his eyes. It had been similarly pale and lifeless.

He remembered Jiang Yanli, who had married the one she loved and finally tasted sweetness after all the bitterness she had suffered. He also thought of Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli's son, A-Ling; the child for whom he had chosen a courtesy name. Despite being so young, the child could already grab his dad's sword, and smile, and make both his parents so very happy. In a couple of days, it would be his one-month banquet.

As he thought, lost in a daze, Wei Wuxian suddenly broke down in tears.

He was at an utter loss. "…Who can tell me…what I'm supposed to do now?"

Other people had always come to him, asking what they should do. Now, he was the one asking. And no one could give him an answer.

Wei Wuxian felt a slight, sudden pain in the side of his neck, as if an extremely fine needle had pricked him. His entire body went numb. He had let his guard down while his mind was in disarray, and it took him a while to realize something was amiss as the numbing sensation washed over him. By the time he did, he had already involuntarily slumped over on a stone bed. At first, he could still raise his arm, but that soon dropped onto the bed too. He could no longer move at all.

Wen Qing's eyes were rimmed with red. She slowly withdrew her hand. "…I'm sorry."

Normally, she would have never been able to successfully get Wei Wuxian with one of her needles. Her speed was no match for his. But Wei Wuxian had not been on his guard at all. That single prick hit him with such force that his mind calmed slightly. His throat bobbed, and he opened his mouth.

"What are you doing?"

Wen Qing and Wen Ning traded glances and stood side by side in front of him. Facing him, they solemnly bowed.

Wei Wuxian felt a manic surge of unease bubble up within him. "What are you going to do? What exactly are you planning to do?"

"We were talking about it earlier, before you woke up," Wen Qing said. "We are more or less done discussing it."

"Discussing what?" Wei Wuxian said. "Cut the crap. Pull out this needle and let me go!"

Wen Ning slowly stood from where he had been kneeling on the ground, his head still bowed. "Jiejie and I have come to an agreement. We will go to Golden Carp Tower and plead guilty."

"Plead guilty?" Wei Wuxian repeated in astonishment. "Plead guilty, how? Apologize? Or turn yourself in?"

Wen Qing rubbed her eyes and spoke with a seemingly tranquil expression. "Yeah, more or less. While you were out cold the past few days, the Jin Clan of Lanling sent men to the foot of the Burial Mounds to shout their message at us."

"What message?" Wei Wuxian probed. "Stop saying one thing at a time and make yourself clear in one go! Spit it all out!"

"The Jin Clan of Lanling wants you to answer for what happened," Wen Qing answered. "And by that, they mean they want you to hand over the two leaders of the Wen Clan survivors. Particularly the Ghost General."

"…I'm warning you both," Wei Wuxian stated. "Pull out this needle. Do it right now."

Wen Qing paid him no heed, but continued to speak. "The leaders of the remaining survivors of the Wen Clan would be us. Judging by what they said, you only need hand us over and this matter will be considered settled for the time being. And so, we must trouble you to lay here a while longer. The needle's effects will wear off in three days. I already told Si-shu and the others; they'll take good care of you. And they will release you if anything unexpected happens during those three days."

Wei Wuxian fumed. "Shut the fuck up! This is already enough of a mess, don't add to my troubles! Plead guilty, my ass! Did I tell you to do that?! Pull the needle out!"

Wen Qing and Wen Ning stood in identical silence with their hands hanging by their sides. Wei Wuxian was completely paralyzed and powerless; his struggles were futile and no one heeded his words. Suddenly, the strength seemed to leave his heart too.

He couldn't scream, he couldn't move. His voice was hoarse as he rasped, "Why are you going to Golden Carp Tower? I wasn't the one who cast the Thousand Sores and Hundred Holes curse…"

"But they've already decided it was you," Wen Qing said.

Wei Wuxian tried his best to find a solution to the problem. Then it came to him. "Then find the real caster! Jin Zixun must have looked for skilled spell practitioners. The usual method for dealing with such malicious curses is to reflect them back onto the person who cast them. Even if not all of it can be made to rebound, some of it can. So we only need to find the person who has the same curse marks!"

"It's no use," Wen Qing said.

"Why not?" Wei Wuxian probed.

"There's a sea of people in the world," Wen Qing said. "Where and how will we find that exact individual? Don't tell me you want to set up checkpoints on every road, in every city, and make everyone strip for us to inspect them?"

"Why *not*?!" Wei Wuxian hastily pressed.

"Who would be willing to set up those checkpoints for you?" Wen Qing rebuffed. "And how long are you going to keep looking? You might be able to find them, given eight or ten years, but are *they* willing to wait?"

"But there's no sign of the curse rebounding on my body!" Wei Wuxian argued.

"Did they ask you about that when they ambushed you?" Wen Qing asked.

"No," Wei Wuxian answered.

"That's right," Wen Qing said. "They didn't. They went straight for the kill. Do you get it now? They don't need any evidence. Nor do they need you to uncover the truth. Whether there are traces of the curse on your body is irrelevant. You are the Yiling Patriarch, supreme ruler of the demonic path. You're skilled in the diabolical arts. It wouldn't be surprising if there were no signs of the curse rebounding on you. Besides, you needn't have cast it yourself—you could send forth your Wen dogs, your minions and lackeys to do

your bidding. Either way, you are the culprit. There is no getting out of it."

Wei Wuxian broke into a string of curses.

Wen Qing waited in silence until he was done before she continued. "So you see, it's no use. At this point, the identity of the person who cast the Thousand Sores and Hundred Holes curse is no longer important. What *is* important is that over three hundred people…including Jin Zixuan…were indeed killed by A-Ning on Qiongqi Path."

"… But…but…" Wei Wuxian sputtered.

But what? Even he couldn't figure out what followed that "but." He couldn't think of any justifications to acquit himself, or any excuses that might absolve him of blame.

"…But even so, I ought to be the one going. I was the one who had a corpse kill them. How is it that the murderer isn't turning himself in, but his weapon is?"

"Isn't it better this way?" Wen Qing asked.

"What's *better* about this?!" Wei Wuxian demanded.

"Wei Ying, we both know that Wen Ning is a weapon," Wen Qing said quietly. "A weapon that strikes fear in them, but also one they are using as an excuse to attack you. Once we go, you will lose your weapon—but they will also no longer have their excuse. And then, perhaps, this will finally be over and done with."

Wei Wuxian stared blankly at her and then suddenly let loose a meaningless howl.

He finally understood why Jiang Cheng was always so furious at the things he did. Why he was always cursing him for having a hero complex, and why he was always itching to beat some sense into him. Being unable to dissuade someone who insisted on shouldering all responsibility and bearing all the terrible consequences—this was truly a feeling most detestable, most abominable!

"Do either of you seriously understand what will become of you if you go to Golden Carp Tower to plead guilty—especially Wen Ning?" Wei Wuxian said. "Don't you dote on your little brother most of all?"

"Whatever comes, it is what he deserves," Wen Qing stated.

No. Wen Ning wasn't the one who deserved it at all. This was all on him.

"Either way, if you think about it, we should have died a long time ago," Wen Qing said. "Technically, we got lucky by gaining these extra days."

Wen Ning nodded.

He was always like this, nodding his head in agreement at whatever anyone else said, not once objecting. Never had Wei Wuxian ever loathed that gesture and that meekness so keenly.

Wen Qing crouched by the bed and stared at his face. Then she suddenly reached out and flicked Wei Wuxian on the forehead with her finger.

That flick had a lot of force in it. It hurt so much that it made Wei Wuxian furrow his brow. Wen Qing's mood seemed to take a turn for the better at the sight.

"I've said my piece and made my meaning clear, and I've also bid my farewells. So, goodbye."

"No—" Wei Wuxian started, but Wen Qing cut him off.

"I've never really said this to you, but now that it's come to this, there are some things that must be said. I really won't have the chance to in the future."

"…Shut up…" Wei Wuxian muttered. "…Release me…"

"I'm sorry," Wen Qing said. "And thank you."

— Part 2 —

WEI WUXIAN LAY there for three full days.

Wen Qing was indeed correct in her calculations. Three full days. Not a moment more or a moment less. Only then was he able to move.

First his fingers, then his limbs, and finally his neck… When his almost frozen blood began to circulate anew throughout his body, Wei Wuxian leapt up and dashed out of the Demon-Quelling Cave.

The rest of the Wens seemed like they hadn't slept for the past three days either. They sat in silence around the table in the large hut. Wei Wuxian didn't spare them a glance as he dashed madly all the way down the Burial Mounds.

After running down the mountain in one breath, he stood there in the middle of the wilderness, bent over with his hands on his knees as he gasped for breath. It was with difficulty that he straightened up again. But as he looked at the numerous overgrown mountain paths, he didn't know which way to go.

The Burial Mounds? He had just come down from there.

Lotus Pier? He hadn't been back there in a year.

Golden Carp Tower?

Three days had already passed. If he went now, he'd probably only see Wen Qing's corpse and Wen Ning's ashes.

He stood in a daze. For as vast as the world was, he suddenly realized he actually had nowhere to go.

Nor did he know what to do either.

And then, a terrible thought sprung up unbidden in his mind.

He had repeatedly rejected this thought over the past three days, but it kept coming back, refusing to be weeded out so easily

now that it had taken root.

Wen Qing and Wen Ning had left on their own. Perhaps, deep down, he was glad they did. Because now, he wouldn't have to agonize over what choice to make. They had taken the initiative to make the choice for him, saving him the trouble.

Wei Wuxian raised a hand and slapped himself, then hissed under his breath, "What are you thinking?!"

His cheeks stung with searing pain, and he finally suppressed the terrible thought once more. Instead, he resolved that no matter what, he should at least bring back the Wen siblings' ashes.

And so, in the end, he still ran in the direction of Golden Carp Tower.

It wasn't hard for Wei Wuxian to sneak into a place without making a sound. Golden Carp Tower was very quiet and surprisingly not as heavily guarded as he'd expected. He searched the premises for a long time but found nothing suspicious.

He wandered the halls of Golden Carp Tower like a ghost, hiding when there were people and moving when there were none. He didn't know what exactly he was looking for, or how he should go about looking for it, but he froze when he heard an infant's cries. A voice inside him urged him to go toward the sound.

The cries originated from a grand, unlit hall.

Wei Wuxian snuck soundlessly to the door. He peeked through the cracks of the wooden windows, which were carved with exquisite fretwork.

A dark coffin rested in the middle of the hall. Two women in white were sitting on their heels before it.

The woman on the left had a frail build. The sight of her back was something Wei Wuxian would never mistake—he had been carried on it countless times since he was young.

It was Jiang Yanli.

Jiang Yanli sat on her heels on a cushion, staring blankly at the polished black coffin before her. She held an infant in her arms as he uttered tiny cries.

The woman on the right spoke softly to her. "…A-Li, don't sit here any longer. Go take a break."

Jiang Yanli shook her head, and Madam Jin sighed.

Madam Jin's personality was quite similar to that of her good friend, Madam Yu. She was strong-minded and always spoke in a loud, confident tone. But when she spoke just now, her voice was quiet and hoarse and made her sound very old.

"I'll keep vigil," Madam Jin insisted. "Don't sit here any longer. You won't be able to take it."

"Mother, I'm fine," Jiang Yanli said softly. "I'd like to stay a while longer."

After a while, Madam Jin slowly stood. "You can't go on like this. I'll go get you something to eat."

She had probably been there for a while as well, sitting on her heels the whole time. Her legs had gone numb, and she tottered slightly as she stood up, but she steadied herself immediately and turned around. Sure enough, Wei Wuxian saw the somewhat steely face of Madam Jin.

The Madam Jin in Wei Wuxian's memory was ruthlessly efficient and resolute. She always wore a haughty expression and was always surrounded by a resplendent air of nobility and affluence. She maintained her youthful looks so well that people would have believed her to be a woman in her early twenties. But right now, what Wei Wuxian saw was an ordinary middle-aged woman. She had graying hair at her temples and was dressed in plain white robes of mourning. She had no makeup on, revealing her ashen complexion and her dry, cracked lips.

Wei Wuxian immediately dodged away when she walked over, about to push the door open to exit the hall. With a light tap of his

foot, he leapt onto the corbel brackets spanning the hallway's ceiling, just as Madam Jin strode out and closed the door behind her. Her gaze was cold. She drew a deep breath and adjusted her expression as if she wished to don her usual air of dignity.

But her eyes reddened before she could fully inhale.

She had never allowed herself to show the slightest hint of sorrow in front of Jiang Yanli. The moment she stepped outside, however, the corners of her mouth fell and her features seemed to collapse in on themselves. Her entire body started to shake.

This was the second time Wei Wuxian had witnessed such an unsightly and heartbreaking expression on a woman's face.

And he really never wanted to see the sight again.

Wei Wuxian clenched his fist without thinking. But his knuckles unexpectedly made a clear, crisp crack, and the moment she heard the noise, Madam Jin's eyebrows immediately shot up.

"Who's there?!"

She looked up and saw Wei Wuxian hiding next to the corbels. Madam Jin, who had excellent eyesight, got a good look at the face concealed in the darkness. Her features contorted for a moment, and then she screamed a command in a shrill voice.

"Men! All of you, come! Wei Ying—he's here! He has infiltrated Golden Carp Tower!"

Wei Wuxian rushed down the long corridor. He heard the frantic clatter of footsteps as someone else rushed out of the grand hall behind him, yet he couldn't help but flee into the night.

He dared not take a single look at the expression on Jiang Yanli's face right now, nor listen to a single word she had for him!

After escaping Golden Carp Tower and leaving Lanling City, Wei Wuxian was directionless once more. He began to wander aimlessly in a confused stupor, moving unceasingly, losing count of how many cities he passed through.

Eventually, he came upon a gathering of people in front of a city wall. They were engaged in heated, animated discussion.

Wei Wuxian initially paid them no mind, but as he walked past, he heard the whispered words "Ghost General." He promptly stopped in his tracks and began to listen with rapt attention.

"The Ghost General really is savage… He said he came to Golden Carp Tower to plead guilty, but then he suddenly went berserk and went on a killing spree!"

"Thank goodness I didn't go that day!"

"As expected of a dog trained by Wei Wuxian. He bites on sight."

"That Wei Ying, though… If he can't control him, then he shouldn't have so thoughtlessly created him! He made a mad dog and didn't even chain it up. It'll backfire on him one day, and with how things are going, I think that day isn't far off."

Wei Wuxian listened quietly. His knuckles twitched slightly, as did his facial muscles.

"Man, the Jin Clan of Lanling is so unlucky."

"The Lan Clan of Gusu is the real unlucky one! Most of the thirty or so people killed were from their clan, even though they were clearly just there for support and to mediate."

"Good thing they finally destroyed the Ghost General with fire. Just the thought of a creature like that roaming free and randomly going berserk is enough to keep me up at night."

"That's the end a Wen dog deserves!" someone spat.

"The Ghost General has been reduced to ash. That should show Wei Wuxian! I heard quite a number of the family heads who will be participating in the Pledge Rally have already spoken up. How gratifying!"

The more Wei Wuxian heard, the more apathetic his expression became.

He should've known. No matter what he did, they would not utter a single kind word for him. They feared him when he succeeded and were elated when he failed.

If wherever his feet touched was the demonic path, what was the point of all his perseverance, all this time? What had it all been for?

As his eyes grew more bone-chillingly cold, his heart blazed with wilder and more furious hellfire.

One of the gossips sounded smug, as if he had personally made some great contribution to the situation. "Yeah, gratifying indeed! If he behaves himself from now on, and just cowers on that shitty hillock with his tail tucked between his legs, whatever. But if he dares show his face again? Heh, as soon as he comes out, I'll…"

"You'll what?"

The crowd who had been gossiping so energetically froze at the interruption and looked back all at once. Standing behind them was a young man dressed in black, with a pallid complexion and dark circles under his eyes.

"If he dares show his face, you'll what?" he repeated icily.

A sharp-eyed person saw the flute at the man's waist, and its vivid red tassel. Seized by great alarm and terror, they screamed, "Chenqing—it's Chenqing!"

The Yiling Patriarch, Wei Wuxian, had really showed up!

The crowd fled in all directions in an instant, emptying the area around Wei Wuxian. He blew a harsh, sharp whistle, and the people suddenly felt weights push their bodies to the ground. They looked back, awash in fear and trepidation—only to discover that they had all been pinned to the ground by spirits of various forms, their mouths dripping with blood!

Wei Wuxian strolled through the sprawled, immobile crowd. "Hmm? What's wrong? Weren't you so arrogant when discussing me

behind my back? Now that I've appeared before you, you've suddenly changed face and prostrated yourselves?"

He meandered over to the man who had blustered most vociferously and stomped on the man's face with his boot. Wei Wuxian burst out laughing.

"Go on, talk. Why aren't you talking anymore? Oh, chivalrous hero, what exactly *were* you going to do to me?!"

The man's nose was crushed by the blow. Blood flowed like a river, and his blood-curdling screams stretched on. Several cultivators watched from atop the city wall, wanting to help but not daring to step forward.

Instead, one of them shouted from afar, "Wei…Wei Ying! If you're so powerful, why don't you go find the clan leaders at the Pledge Rally? What can you prove by bullying us low-level cultivators who are too powerless to fight back?"

Wei Wuxian blew another short whistle, and that particular cultivator suddenly felt a hand yank him hard. He plummeted from the top of the city wall and broke both legs in the fall, letting loose a long, blood-curdling howl.

Wei Wuxian spoke over those pitiful screams, expression unchanged. "Low-level cultivators? I have to tolerate you just because you're low-level cultivators? You talk, you reap the consequences. If you know you're no better than insects, why don't you know that you should watch your tongues?!"

Doom clouded the blanched faces of the crowd, and they were terrified into silence. When Wei Wuxian didn't hear another word of idle gossip after some time had passed, he was satisfied.

"There we go."

With another kick, he knocked out half of the teeth of the man who had been the most enthusiastic in his fabrications.

Blood splattered across the ground. Everyone trembled and went even paler. The man had already passed out from the pain.

Wei Wuxian lowered his head and scrubbed the bloodstained soles of his boots against the ground, leaving behind several bloody footprints. He scrutinized them briefly before delivering one last comment in a mild tone.

"But you insects were right about one thing—there's no point wasting time on you. You're telling me to go find those major clans? Very well, then. I'll be off. Let's go settle some scores."

As soon as he looked up, he saw the huge bulletin posted on the city wall. It was the one the crowd had gathered around to gossip.

At the top were the words "Pledge Rally." The contents of the bulletin were as follows: the four major clans—the Jin Clan of Lanling, the Nie Clan of Qinghe, the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng, and the Lan Clan of Gusu—had resolved to scatter the ashes of the Wen Clan's survivors atop the abandoned ruins of the Wen Clan of Qishan's residence, the Nightless City. They had also resolved to pledge their opposition to the Yiling Patriarch, who had established his dominion over the Burial Mounds.

A Pledge Rally at Nightless City?

The crowd was still terrified, sure they were about to meet a tragic end at the hands of the Yiling Patriarch and have their corpses drafted into his service. But Wei Wuxian was no longer interested in them. After reading the bulletin, he cast them from his mind and exited the area with his hands clasped behind him, leaving them on the ground.

He didn't recall the spirits holding them down. Those who cried out in pain continued to wail, and those who squirmed continued to writhe. Not a single person was able to crawl to their feet.

Some time later, a blue sword glare suddenly streaked past them. Everyone felt the weight lift in an instant.

"I can move now!" someone exclaimed.

A few people, climbing to their feet with some difficulty, saw the blue sword glare sail back to its wielder's sheath.

The wielder of the sword was a very young, handsome man with a refined air about him. He was dressed in white and wore a forehead ribbon, his expression frosty and solemn, a trace of suppressed worry coloring his brow. His steps were swift as he walked over, but he did not look at all hurried. Even his sleeves did not flutter in the wind.

The cultivator whose legs had been broken battled the pain to call out to him. "Han…Hanguang-jun!"

Lan Wangji walked over to the man and crouched, pressing on his legs to ascertain the extent of his injuries. Determining them to not be too severe, he rose to his feet, but the cultivator continued before he could speak a word.

"Hanguang-jun, you are too late, sir. Wei Wuxian just left!"

Quite a few people knew that Hanguang-jun of the Lan Clan of Gusu had been trying to track down Wei Wuxian these last few days —surely to settle the score with him, to make him pay for the dozens of lives the Lan Clan of Gusu had lost so senselessly.

"Yeah! He just left, less than two hours ago!" someone else quickly interjected.

"What did he do? Where did he go?" Lan Wangji asked.

The crowd immediately began to vent their grievances to him. "He attacked us without rhyme or reason! He nearly killed all of us on the spot!"

Lan Wangji's hands were concealed under his snow-white wide sleeves. His fingers twitched slightly, as if he were about to clench them into fists, but he relaxed them quickly enough.

"But he did say that he was heading to Nightless City, to settle the score with the four major clans at the Pledge Rally!" the cultivator quickly added.

After the annihilation of the Wen Clan of Qishan, the halls of Nightless City had been reduced to a magnificent but empty ruin. At the highest point of Nightless City stood Scorching Sun Palace. An impossibly wide public square stretched before it. There had once been three towering flag poles at the very front of the square, but two were now broken, while the remaining one flew a blazing sun flag that was tattered and smeared with blood.

Tonight, the square was densely packed with representatives of various clans. They had arranged themselves into neat, square formations both large and small. Each clan's flag, emblazoned with their family crest, flew high in the night breeze. A temporary altar had been constructed before the broken flag poles.

Each clan head stood at the lead of their respective formation. Jin Guangyao presented each of them with a cup of wine in turn. After they had all received a cup, the clan leaders raised them high, then poured the wine on the ground.

The spilled wine seeped into the soil, and Jin Guangshan said with solemn reverence, "This wine is hereby offered to the deceased heroes of the cultivation world, irrespective of clan or family name."

"The souls of the brave departed live on forever," Nie Mingjue said.

"Rest in peace," Lan Xichen said.

Jiang Cheng simply looked gloomy. Even after he had poured out the wine, he did not say a word.

Next, Jin Guangyao stepped forward from the Jin Clan of Lanling's formation and held out a square, black metal box with both hands. Jin Guangshan took the box with a single hand and raised it high.

"Here are the ashes of the surviving Wens!" he bellowed.

Then he focused his spiritual energy and cracked the metal box with his bare hand. The box shattered into pieces and white ash scattered in the chilly night breeze.

Bones crushed to ashes and scattered!

Cheers erupted from the crowd. Jin Guangshan raised both hands and motioned for everyone to quiet down and listen to his speech. When the cheers gradually subsided, he continued in a loud voice.

"The ashes scattered tonight were those of the two leaders of the Wen survivors. Tomorrow, it will be those of the remaining Wen dogs and the Yiling Patriarch, Wei Ying!"

A low chuckle suddenly interrupted his impassioned speech.

This laugh was untimely, both abrupt and jarring. The crowd instantly looked to where the sound had come.

Scorching Sun Palace was a magnificent edifice, with a total of twelve roof ridges and eight divine beasts installed at each end. But, the crowd suddenly realized, there were nine beasts on one of the ridges. The chuckle had come from there!

The extra beast shifted slightly. The next second, a boot and a fold of black clothing now dangled from the eaves, swaying gently.

Everyone brought their hands to their swords. Jiang Cheng's pupils shrank, and blue veins bulged on the backs of his hands. Alarmed and seething with hatred, Jin Guangshan shouted at Wei Wuxian.

"Wei Ying! How dare you show your face here?!"

The man spoke. It was indeed Wei Wuxian, but his voice sounded very strange.

"Why would I not dare? Are there even three thousand of you here? Don't forget I fought alone against five thousand during the Sunshot Campaign. Three thousand is nothing to me. And besides, doesn't showing my face here suit you just fine? It saves you the trouble of making a special trip to my doorstep tomorrow to crush my bones and scatter my ashes."

The Nie Clan of Qinghe had also lost several disciples to Wen Ning going berserk. "Arrogant boy," Nie Mingjue said coldly.

"Aren't I always?" Wei Wuxian said. "Sect Leader Jin, is it fun to eat your own words? Who was it that said the matter would be over as long as the Wen siblings went to Golden Carp Tower to plead guilty? And who was it that said that he would scatter my ashes tomorrow, along with those of the remaining Wens?"

"That's a different matter altogether!" Jin Guangshan said. "During the ambush at Qiongqi Path, you slaughtered over a hundred of my Jin Sect's disciples. This is one matter. And then you let Wen Ning commit murder at Golden Carp Tower, which is another __"

"Then, dare I ask Sect Leader Jin," Wei Wuxian asked, "who was the one being ambushed at Qiongqi Path? Who was the one who should have been killed? Who was the mastermind and who was the target? And at the root of it all, who provoked me first?!"

The sect disciples standing in their formations felt safe, concealed among the sea of people, so they summoned their courage and shouted at him one after another.

"Even if Jin Zixun plotted to ambush you, you shouldn't have so ruthlessly killed so many people!"

"Oh?" Wei Wuxian helped the one who'd spoken dissect his statement. "So if he wants to kill me, he needn't have any misgivings about dealing a lethal blow. If I die, that's just my bad luck. But if I defend myself, I must have reservations about who I hurt—even about whether I should touch a single strand of anyone's hair in the first place. In short, you can ambush me, but I can't fight back. Is that right?"

Sect Leader Yao raised his voice. "Fight back? Those hundred-plus souls were all innocent, as were the thirty lost at Golden Carp Tower. Even if you were defending yourself, why did you have to involve them?!"

"The fifty or so Wen cultivators on the Burial Mounds are also innocent. Why do you have to involve them?"

"What great kindness did the Wen dogs do you, to make you so partial to those scum?" someone else spat.

"I don't think there was any great kindness at all. He just considers himself a hero, set against the whole world. He thinks he's doing chivalrous deeds, and thinks himself noble for risking universal condemnation!"

Wei Wuxian fell silent at this.

The crowd below took his silence as a retreat. "When all is said and done, it's your fault for casting such a despicable, malicious curse on Jin Zixun!"

"What proof do you have that I was the one who laid the curse?" Wei Wuxian asked.

The man who'd asked the question was struck speechless by Wei Wuxian's reply. Briefly stumped, he then countered, "And what proof do you have that you aren't the culprit?"

Wei Wuxian smiled. "Then let me ask—why couldn't it have been you? You don't have any proof that you didn't cast the curse, do you?"

The person was both shocked and furious. "Me? How could I possibly be the same as you? Don't go confusing right and wrong! You are the most suspicious of all. Do you think we didn't know you and Jin Zixun bore each other a grudge for over a year?!"

"Who exactly is the confused one here?" Wei Wuxian said chillingly. "That's right. If I wanted to kill him, I would have done so a year ago. I wouldn't need to wait this long. If I waited, I'd forget a character like him in three days, much less a year."

Sect Leader Yao was shocked. "…Wei Wuxian, oh, Wei Wuxian. What an eye-opener today has been. I've never seen a crook as unreasonable as you… You continue to humiliate and insult your victims even after you kill them. Do you not have the slightest bit of sympathy or remorse?"

Curses were hurled at him from all directions, but Wei Wuxian accepted them calmly.

Only fury could suppress the other emotions in his heart.

One of the cultivators standing at the forefront of the formation said, with bitter grief, "Wei Ying, you truly disappoint me. To think I used to admire and look up to you! I even said that, if nothing else, you were a founder, someone who established the first generation of your own sect. It's almost nauseating, in retrospect. From now on, you and I stand in opposition!"

Wei Wuxian was taken aback by this speech at first but then burst into hysterical laughter.

"Ha ha ha ha…."

He laughed so hard he could barely breathe.

"You admired me? You say that, but why did I never see you, back when you admired me? And when everyone began to bay for my blood, you popped up waving your little flag to cheer in support!"

Wei Wuxian laughed till he was shedding tears.

"That admiration of yours was a bit cheap, wasn't it? And now you're talking about opposing me. All right, then. But what does your antagonism and animosity matter to me? Your admiration, your contempt—they're both so utterly insignificant. How are you not embarrassed to parade them about like this?"

He had just finished when he suddenly choked. A burst of dull pain bloomed in his chest. Wei Wuxian dropped his gaze to see a feathered arrow piercing him, the head buried between two of his ribs.

He looked in the direction the arrow had come from. The archer was a young cultivator with delicate features, still in his shooting stance as he stood among the formation of his small clan. His bowstring was still quivering.

Wei Wuxian could tell the arrow had been aiming for a fatal strike at his heart. But the archer was not particularly skilled, and

the arrow's momentum had waned as it flew, causing the shot to miss his heart and pierce his rib cage instead. The people around the archer were wide-eyed with shock and even horror as they looked at their fellow, who had made such a reckless move.

Wei Wuxian raised his head. There was murderous fury on his face as he yanked out the arrow and flung it back with his might. A horrible cry rang out—the arrow he had hurled back had struck the young archer right in the chest!

A young cultivator standing by the archer's side threw himself atop his body and wailed. "Ge! Ge!"

The clan's formation was instantly thrown into disarray. The leader of the clan pointed a trembling finger at Wei Wuxian.

"You… You… You're so vicious!"

Wei Wuxian casually pressed his hand to his chest to temporarily stop the bleeding.

"What do you mean by that?" he said indifferently. "He dared try a sneak attack on me. He should have expected that would be his fate if he missed. You all call me a cultivator of the demonic path —surely you can't have hoped I'd be magnanimous enough to let it go?"

"Fall into battle formation!" Jin Guangshan shouted. "We must not let him leave here alive!"

With this order, the standoff was finally broken. Riding their swords with bows in hand, several disciples charged forward to encircle the top of the hall.

They had finally made the first move!

With a sneer, Wei Wuxian took Chenqing from his waist and lifted it to his lips. At the flute's sharp cry, countless ghastly pale hands broke through the ground of Nightless City's square!

Corpse after corpse pushed up through the paved white stones and crawled from the depths of the earth. Any cultivators who had only just mounted their swords were instantly dragged down by the

corpses' grasping limbs. Wei Wuxian stood on the roof of Scorching Sun Palace, playing his bamboo flute as his eyes glinted coldly in the darkness of the night.

Seen from above, the clans' uniforms resembled a pot of boiling dye of various hues, churning and roiling incessantly, colors scattering and gathering in turn. Their formations had been thrown into disorder, save for the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng. Every clan leader was so busy protecting their own disciples that they were too preoccupied to attack Wei Wuxian.

Right then, the icy notes of a guqin disrupted Chenqing's song.

Wei Wuxian lowered Chenqing. He looked back to see a person sitting on another of the roof's ridges, his guqin laid horizontally across his lap. His snow-white clothes were almost blinding in the darkness of the night.

"Ah, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian called out in a cold voice.

After he had greeted him, he raised the flute to his lips once more.

"You should have known long ago that Purification Tone doesn't work on me!"

Lan Wangji flipped his guqin onto his back, drew Bichen, and lunged directly at Chenqing in an attempt to cleave the hellish flute that created such diabolical notes.

Wei Wuxian whirled around to sidestep the attack and laughed out loud. "Very good, very good. I always knew there would come a day when we'd have to fight for real, like this. You never liked me all that much, anyway. Bring it on!"

Lan Wangji's movements stalled when he heard this. *"Wei Ying!"*

Though he shouted the name forcefully, any sober person would have been able to tell that Lan Wangji's voice was trembling. But Wei Wuxian had already lost all ability to judge such things. He was already half-mad, half-delirious. His mind infinitely magnified all

the ill will people bore him until he was absolutely certain that every single person in the world loathed him—for he, too, loathed them all in return. No matter who came at him, he was not afraid. It was all the same. It didn't matter who it was. That was all there was to it.

Amidst the sounds of fighting and killing, Wei Wuxian suddenly heard a faint shout.

"A-Xian!"

The voice was like a basin of cold water, completely dousing the vicious fire raging in his heart.

Jiang Yanli?

When had she come to the Pledge Rally?!

The sudden shock left Wei Wuxian almost dead with terror. He lowered Chenqing, unable to care less about continuing the fight with Lan Wangji.

"Shijie?!"

Jiang Cheng had also heard her voice. The color instantly drained from his face. "Jie? Jie?! Where are you? Where are you?!"

Wei Wuxian leapt from the roof of Scorching Sun Palace and shouted himself hoarse, just as Jiang Cheng was doing.

"Shijie? Shijie?! Where are you? Where are you?! I don't see you!"

Disregarding the countless glinting, flashing blades and swords that came pressing in toward him, he struck out with his palms and fists as he rushed through the chaotic crowd. All of a sudden, he saw Jiang Yanli's white figure submerged in the sea of colors. Wei Wuxian did all he could to shove through the people blocking his path, advancing with difficulty. There was still a considerable distance and countless people between them, and for a moment, Wei Wuxian could not move at all. It was the same for Jiang Cheng.

To make matters worse, it was at that very moment that they both realized a half-decayed fierce corpse was swaying to its feet

behind Jiang Yanli.

Dragging a rusty longsword in its grip, it moved toward her.

Seeing this chilling scene unfold, Wei Wuxian barked sharply, "Scram! Get lost! Don't touch her!"

"Make it go away!" Jiang Cheng roared.

He hurled Sandu at the fierce corpse. The sword's purple glare hurtled forward but was knocked off course midway by another cultivator's sword glare.

The more flustered and panicked Wei Wuxian grew, the worse his control became. The fierce corpse completely ignored his commands. Instead, it raised the longsword in its grip before bringing it down on Jiang Yanli!

Wei Wuxian lost his mind completely, screaming as he charged forward. "Stop! Stop! Stop it now!"

Everyone was busy dealing with the fierce corpses swarming around them, unable to pay attention to whether someone else was in danger. With one blow, the fierce corpse split open the flesh of Jiang Yanli's back!

Jiang Yanli fell to the ground. The fierce corpse stood behind her and raised its sword once more.

Just then, a sword glare hurtled forth and sliced off half of its body, sending it flying!

Lan Wangji landed on the square and smoothly caught hold of Bichen after he summoned it back. It was only then that Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng rushed over, too preoccupied to even thank him. Jiang Cheng scooped up Jiang Yanli, beating Wei Wuxian to it. Lan Wangji, on the other hand, intercepted Wei Wuxian and grabbed him by the collar to haul him around so they were face-to-face.

"Wei Ying," he snapped sharply. "Stop the corpses!"

Wei Wuxian barely registered Lan Wangji's face, much less noticed his bloodshot eyes. All he cared about right now was Jiang

Yanli; all he wanted to do was go over and see if Jiang Yanli was okay. With reddened eyes, he shoved Lan Wangji away and threw himself to the ground.

Lan Wangji staggered from the push. He steadied himself and looked at Wei Wuxian, but before he could make his next move, he suddenly heard a wretched cry for help in the distance. Suppressing the emotions surging within him, he rushed over to the rescue.

Jiang Yanli's back was soaked with blood. Her eyes were closed, but thankfully, she was still breathing. Jiang Cheng drew back the trembling hand that he had used to take her pulse and heaved a sigh of relief. All of a sudden, he punched Wei Wuxian right in the face.

"What's going on?!" Jiang Cheng screamed at him. "Didn't you say you could control it? Didn't you say there was no problem?!"

Wei Wuxian slumped to the ground, sitting in a stupefied heap. "…I don't know either." Despairingly, he said, "…I can't control it. I can't…"

Just then, Jiang Yanli jerked. Jiang Cheng held her tightly in his arms.

"Jiejie! It's okay! It's okay. How are you? Fortunately, it was just one gash. Fortunately," he rambled on incoherently. "I'll take you away right now…"

He moved to lift her as he spoke, but Jiang Yanli suddenly called out.

"…A-Xian."

Wei Wuxian shuddered and quickly responded. "Shijie, I…I'm here."

Jiang Yanli slowly opened her dark eyes. A burst of panic seized Wei Wuxian.

"…A-Xian." Speaking seemed to be a terrible effort for her, but she still continued. "You ran away so fast…last time… I didn't even get a chance to take a look at you, or say a single word to you…"

Wei Wuxian's heart pounded wildly as he listened. He still didn't dare look directly at Jiang Yanli, especially right now. Her face was covered in dirt and blood, just as Jin Zixuan's face had been back then.

He was even more afraid to hear what she was going to say next.

"I…came here to tell you…" Jiang Yanli said.

Tell him what?

"It's all right?"

"I don't hate you?"

"Everything's okay?"

"I don't blame you for killing Jin Zixuan?"

Impossible.

But she couldn't bring herself to say anything to the opposite effect either. Though she didn't know what she *could* say to Wei Wuxian under the circumstances…

All she knew was that she *had* to come and see her little brother.

With a sigh, Jiang Yanli said, "A-Xian, stop… You have to stop first. Don't… Don't…"

"Okay," Wei Wuxian hurriedly replied, "I'll stop."

He picked up Chenqing, put it to his lips, lowered his head and began to play. It took him a great deal of effort to steady his mind. This time, the fierce corpses no longer ignored his command. One by one, they slowly prostrated themselves, making strange gurgling sounds in their throats, as if in complaint.

Lan Wangji paused in his tracks, gazing over at them from afar. Then he turned back and continued to attack with his sword, helping his struggling peers irrespective of whether they were from his sect or not.

All of a sudden, Jiang Yanli snapped her eyes open wide. With an unexpected burst of energy, she shoved Wei Wuxian with both hands!

The force of the shove pushed Wei Wuxian back to the ground. When he raised his eyes, he saw a long, gleaming sword had pierced her throat.

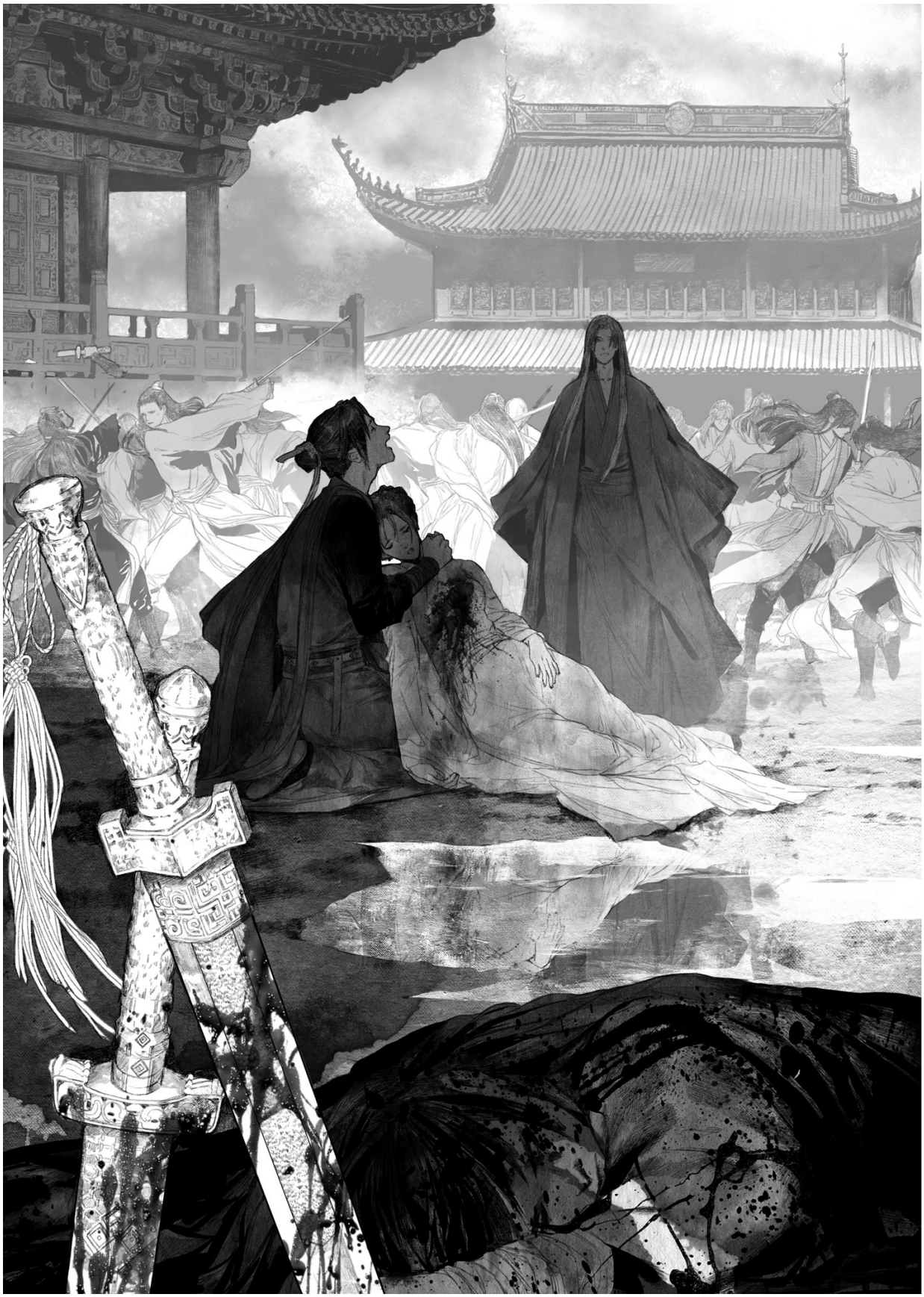
The one wielding the sword was the same young cultivator who had thrown himself onto the archer's body and cried so bitterly. He was still weeping profusely, tears blurring his vision, as he shouted, "Wei, you villain! That's for my older brother!"

Wei Wuxian sat on the filthy ground, staring at Jiang Yanli in disbelief. Her head hung limply. Blood flowed ceaselessly from her throat.

He was waiting for her to speak, as if to hear her pass her last judgment upon him.

Jiang Cheng was in a daze as well, still hugging his older sister's body. Reality had yet to set in.

A long time passed before Wei Wuxian let loose a grief-stricken scream.



Lan Wangji struck with his sword and whirled around.

Only then did the young cultivator realize he had killed the wrong person. He yanked out his sword, bringing with it a spray of blood. As he backed away in a panic, he sputtered, "…No, it's not me, it's not… I meant to kill Wei Wuxian, I wanted to avenge my brother… She was the one who threw herself in the way!"

Wei Wuxian seized him by the throat in a flash of movement.

Sect Leader Yao brandished his sword. "Demon, unhand him!"

Lan Wangji could no longer be bothered to maintain his poise. He shoved aside the people blocking his way, one after the other, as he dashed toward Wei Wuxian. But he hadn't even made it halfway when, in full view of all present, Wei Wuxian snapped the young cultivator's neck with his bare hand.

"You!" a clan leader exclaimed in rage. "You…dragged down Jiang Fengmian and his wife, you were the one who caused their deaths. And now you've made your shijie share their fate! You have only yourself to blame, yet you still dare take it out on others! Instead of repenting, you continue to kill! Wei Ying, you… Your crimes are beyond forgiveness!"

But Wei Wuxian could no longer hear any of the abuse and condemnation they hurled at him.

It was like he was being controlled by another soul as he reached both hands into his sleeves to retrieve two objects. Then, before the eyes of all, he pieced the objects together.

One half at the top, one half at the bottom. The two objects joined as one, emitting an ominous, resounding clang.

Wei Wuxian held it in his palm and lifted it high.

The Yin Tiger Tally!

Chapter 19:
Core of the Truehearted

— Part 1 —

THE NIGHTLESS CITY MASSACRE—that was what they called the bloody battle on the night of the Pledge Rally. Legend said that the Yiling Patriarch, Wei Wuxian, single-handedly slaughtered all three thousand cultivators present. Some said there were over five thousand. But whether three or five thousand, one thing was certain: that night, Wei Wuxian transformed the ruins of Nightless City into hell on earth. And, though he was the target of every cultivator present, the murderer was able to retreat to the Burial Mounds completely unscathed. No one knew how he had done it.

Every clan suffered heavy casualties in the battle. The four major clans took three months to rally their strength and solidify their plans before they launched a successful siege of the demon's lair, the Burial Mounds. And thus, they repaid the slaughter in kind to the evil Wen survivors and the mad Yiling Patriarch.

Wei Wuxian observed the cultivators swarming before the Demon-Quelling Cave. He had seen nearly the same expressions on the night of the Pledge Rally, when the attendees had poured out wine and vowed to reduce him and the Wen survivors to ashes. Some of the cultivators present today were those who'd been lucky enough to survive that night, and some were descendants of those who hadn't. Almost all of them, however, were "warriors of justice"—and they shared the same beliefs as those people back then.

"A blood debt of three thousand souls—it won't be repaid even if you die a million deaths!" said the middle-aged cultivator named Yi Weichun, who had claimed that Wei Wuxian had injured his leg so badly he now had to wear a wooden prosthetic.

Wei Wuxian cut him off. "Three thousand? There *were* around three thousand cultivators present that night at Nightless City, but that includes the leaders and elites of every clan. Could I really have killed *all* three thousand people with them around? Do you think too highly of me, or too little of them?"

He was only indifferently stating a fact, but the cultivator felt belittled and humiliated.

"What do you think we're discussing right now?!" he bit back furiously. "Can a blood debt be haggled over?"

"I'm not trying to haggle. I just don't want people to so casually exaggerate my past crimes. I don't wanna carry the burden of things I didn't do."

"What you didn't do? What *didn't* you do?" one cultivator rebuked.

"Well, I didn't tear Chifeng-zun to pieces," Wei Wuxian said. "I didn't force Lianfang-zun's wife, Madam Jin, to commit suicide at Golden Carp Tower either. I also wasn't the one manipulating the animated corpses you met on the way up the mountain."

Su She chuckled. "Yiling Patriarch, I've heard you were presumptuous, but I never expected you to be *humble*. Who, if not you, could control so many animated corpses and force us into this sorry situation?"

"Is it that hard? Anyone could do it with the Yin Tiger Tally," Wei Wuxian said.

"Isn't the Yin Tiger Tally *your* spiritual weapon?" Su She countered.

"I think that's a question for whoever is so obsessed with it," Wei Wuxian answered. "It's just like Wen Ning. A certain prominent clan is clearly terrified of the Ghost General, and calls for his demise —but they also kept him around in secret for over a dozen years. Weird. And who was it again that said he'd been reduced to ashes?"

Everyone unconsciously looked at the Jin sect disciples. After all, the then-leader of the Jin Clan of Lanling had been wholly responsible for that affair. He had solemnly sworn the two leaders of the Wen survivors had been burned to dust, and even taken the lead in scattering their ashes at Nightless City.

"There's no need for you to sow discord," Su She rebuked instantly.

At that moment, the trees began to rustle anew. Strange gurgling noises echoed from the depths of the forest.

"Be careful, everyone! A new wave of fierce corpses is approaching!" Lan Qiren cautioned.

At his words, half of the crowd turned to face the oncoming horde. The other half remained on guard, keeping their swords pointed at the "rabble" in front of the Demon-Quelling Cave.

"I already told you," Wei Wuxian reiterated. "Those fierce corpses aren't under my control. If you've got time to look at me, why not pay attention to them instead?"

There were quite a few accomplished cultivators present, including several clan leaders and elders. A mob of fierce corpses presented no threat. Sword glares and guqin notes shot forth alike, and most people were too preoccupied to care what was happening at the cave entrance.

Jiang Cheng reduced three fierce corpses to dust with a single lash of his whip. He turned to Jin Ling and snapped, "Jin Ling! Are you looking to have your legs broken?!"

He meant that if Jin Ling didn't come over that instant, he'd break his legs when they got home. But Jin Ling had heard him make that threat so many times now, and not once had it ever been carried out. Though he shot a glance Jiang Cheng's way, he did not move. Jiang Cheng cursed and turned his wrist, aiming to ensnare Jin Ling with Zidian and bring him back by force.

But unexpectedly, the purple light coursing through Zidian's body suddenly dimmed. Moments later, its current was completely extinguished.

The long whip swiftly transformed back into a silver ring and slotted itself onto Jiang Cheng's index finger. He stood where he was, stunned and wordless. Zidian disengaging without being issued a direct command—this had never happened before.

As he stared at his hand, two drops of blood suddenly hit the center of his palm.

He raised his hand to wipe his face, and it came away smeared with red.

"Jiujiu!" Jin Ling cried out.

One after another, cries of alarm arose from the others fighting the corpse horde. Most sword glares had gone dim. Nearly half of the cultivators present were visibly confused as blood freely flowed from their nostrils. Some were bleeding from the nose *and* mouth!

One of the sword cultivators began to panic. "What's going on?!"

"My spiritual powers are gone!"

"Give me a hand, shixiong! Something's gone wrong over here!"

Bichen hurtled out of its sheath and cut down the two fierce corpses pursuing the cultivator who had cried for help. But the cries were only growing more numerous; as one fell, another would rise. The crowd was gradually gathering closer and closer together and retreating toward the Demon-Quelling Cave.

The cultivators who had hiked up the Burial Mounds in anticipation of a major battle had suddenly lost their spiritual powers. Not only had sword glares disappeared and talismans malfunctioned, but even the Lan Clan of Gusu and the Su Clan of Moling's instruments had been reduced to producing ordinary music that lacked any demon-repelling effects.

A dramatic turn of events!

Lan Wangji took the guqin from his back, and the strum of its strings shook the heavens. But no matter how skillful or awe-inspiring his Eradication Tone might be, he was only one man. Wen Ning leapt from the Demon-Quelling Cave to aid him in driving away the fierce corpses, suffering the assault of other cultivators in silence. Thankfully, he felt no pain.

Amidst this utter confusion and chaos, Lan Sizhui suddenly rushed out of the cave, shouting to the crowd.

"Everyone, come here! Come inside the Demon-Quelling Cave! There's a huge array on the ground in there. It's missing some bits and pieces, but it should be usable once repaired. Then we can ward off the fierce corpses for a while!"

Some of the cultivators, their thoughts shaken and scattered by the carnage, moved to rush into the cave at once. But Su She quickly admonished them.

"Do not go inside! That will only make us easy prey! There must be an even more dangerous trap waiting for us in there!"

The crowd startled, regaining their senses at his admonishment, and grew indecisive. With a slash of his hand, Wei Wuxian hurled out over sixty fluttering talismans.

"It's death outside, it's death inside. You die either way, but you might be able to buy a little time if you head on in. Why are you so eager for everyone to die together, huh?"

Although what he'd just said made a lot of sense, even fewer people now dared to go inside—precisely *because* he was the one who'd said it. They continued to hesitate even as they struggled against the fierce corpses.

The others could make do for a while without spiritual powers, but Nie Huaisang couldn't wait. It was common knowledge that he was cowardly and feared trouble; with little in the way of natural talent, his cultivation was lackluster and he had no motivation to

improve. This sudden turn of events had reduced him to a flustered mess, and he remained unscathed only due to the efforts of his bodyguards. Seeing the corpses continue to gather, with no end in sight, he cried out to the crowd.

"Are you guys going inside or not?! If not, I'm gonna go on in! So sorry. Go, go, go, go, go, everybody hurry!"

Before he even finished speaking, he decided to simply order the Nie Clan of Qinghe's sect disciples to retreat into the Demon-Quelling Cave. Truly, he was as anxious as a lost dog and as panicked as a fugitive, and his display of frankness made everyone's jaws drop.

"Dad, stop fighting! Trust me, go inside!" Ouyang Zizhen urged. "We just came out of the cave, there are no traps in there!"

The rest of the boys also started shouting. "Yeah, there really is a huge array on the ground inside!"

"Jiujiu, come inside!" Jin Ling beckoned.

Jiang Cheng lunged at the horde with Sandu, which had completely lost its glare. "Shut up!" he snapped at him ferociously.

As he yelled, more blood poured from his nose and mouth. Jin Ling rushed down the steps, seized him, and started dragging him toward the Demon-Quelling Cave. Jiang Cheng's spiritual powers were completely gone by now, and he was physically drained from grappling with the enemy for half a day, so Jin Ling was able to haul him over just like that. The Jiang Clan's cultivators hurried to follow their sect leader.

Nie Huaisang's overjoyed voice echoed from inside the vast Demon-Quelling Cave. "Everyone, come in, quick! It's so spacious in here! Is there a qianbei who can help with the array on the ground? I dunno how! I dunno how to fix this!"

At that last bit, the same word blared through everyone's minds: *Useless!*

Fingers never leaving the strings of his guqin, Lan Wangji looked up and called out, "Shufu!"

Lan Qiren hadn't wanted to go in, at first. He would rather have remained outside and fought until the bitter end. However, he was not waging this battle alone—there were many Lan and Jin Clan cultivators under his command, and they were not the main force in the fight. He did not want to treat the lives of those disciples with such disregard. If there was a thread of hope for survival, he was compelled to seize it.

He didn't look at Lan Wangji but raised his sword and shouted, "Go inside and stay vigilant!"

By this point, all four major clans had retreated inside the cave—the Jin Clan of Lanling, the Lan Clan of Gusu, the Nie Clan of Qinghe, and the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng. With them taking the lead, the rest of the clans immediately decided to abandon this dogged, uneven battle. After all, if there *were* ferocious beasts or nefarious creatures inside the Demon-Quelling Cave, the four big guys in front would take care of them.

And so, the minor clans swarmed inside. Only the Su Clan of Moling did not follow.

"Hmm? Sect Leader Su, are you not coming in?" Wei Wuxian taunted. "Very well. Stay out here, then. But hasn't everyone lost their spiritual powers? Aren't you throwing your life away by staying outside? Your courage is commendable."

Su She shot him a look, his gloomy face twitching nonstop. In the end, he still led his disciples inside.

The Demon-Quelling Cave easily held the thousand-plus cultivators in attendance. Their panting breaths, distressed conversations, and disquieted voices echoed endlessly in the vast, empty main cavern.

Lan Qiren went to Nie Huaisang's side the moment he entered, and under the latter's ardently hopeful gaze, inspected the damaged array on the ground. The array was indeed aged and worn. He cut

his palm then and there, filling the gaps in the array with his blood. Wen Ning was guarding the stairs, blocking several fierce corpses from getting in. The moment the array was repaired, an invisible barrier sealed the cave against the walking corpses, putting a temporary stop to the horde's onslaught.

Wei Wuxian waited until Lan Wangji had packed away his guqin before they strolled back into the cave. The thousand-plus cultivators had only just begun to relax when the sight of the black and white pair descending the stairs made their hearts jumped into their throats again.

No one had foreseen this would be how it ended. They had come to besiege the Yiling Patriarch but now found *themselves* surrounded. Worse, they had to hide inside the Yiling Patriarch's good old lair to survive even just a little longer.

Once Lan Qiren had repaired the array on the ground, he moved to the front of the crowd to block Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian's path. He held his head high, standing straight and tall and puffing out his chest—stopping just short of opening both arms wide. He acted like he was ready to fight to the bitter end if Wei Wuxian dared try and destroy the array; ready to both lay down his own life and perish with him if need be.

"…Shufu," Lan Wangji greeted.

Lan Qiren's disappointment had yet to recede. For now, he still couldn't bring himself to look at his favorite pupil, whom he had taught since childhood. He looked at Wei Wuxian instead and coldly demanded, "What, exactly, do you want?"

Wei Wuxian sat down on the steps. "Nothing. Since we're all inside now, let's chat…"

"We have nothing to talk to you about!" Yi Weichun shouted.

"What do you mean?" Wei Wuxian asked. "I refuse to believe you guys aren't curious about why you suddenly lost your powers. Heavens be my witness, I'm not powerful enough to affect all of you without anyone noticing."

Yi Weichun scoffed, but Nie Huaisang spoke up. "Yeah, I think he makes a good point."

The crowd glared at him.

"I bet none of you had time to sit down and eat before heading off to besiege me, so it couldn't have been poison," Wei Wuxian continued.

"It's definitely not poison," Lan Sizhui joined in. "I've never heard of a poison that can impair spiritual power so suddenly. If such a poison existed, it would fetch a hefty sum, it would be highly sought after by many cultivators, and word of its existence would spread like wildfire."

Many of the cultivators who'd set off on this campaign were doctors. They grabbed a few test subjects and dragged them over to examine them.

Afterward, the test subjects whispered, "How is it? Is the spiritual power impairment temporary or permanent?"

This question got everyone's attention at once. Suddenly, no one had time to be wary of whatever Wei Wuxian was up to. If their spiritual power had been permanently impaired and could never be recovered, that was tantamount to becoming crippled for life. It was a far more terrifying, agonizing prospect than dying in here.

The doctors conferred for a while. In the end, they concluded, "No need to worry—everyone's cores are well and undamaged! This condition should only be temporary."

Jiang Cheng secretly breathed a sigh of relief when he heard it would pass. He took the handkerchief Jin Ling passed to him and wiped away the blood on his face.

"Temporary, you said? How long is 'temporary'?" he demanded. "When will my powers be restored?"

Hesitantly, one of the doctors answered, "…Probably…at least four hours…"

Jiang Cheng's expression turned frighteningly dark. "Four hours?!"

The cultivators gazed outside the Demon-Quelling Cave, where the dense horde of fierce corpses swarmed. Their numbers matched those of the living humans in the expedition. Every single one of the corpses had their eyes locked on the human heads moving around inside the Demon-Quelling Cave, captivated by the billowing yang energy. Reluctant to move a single step away, the swarm was packed together so tight that the corpses were writhing and rubbing shoulders as they shuffled about outside. They looked like they would charge inside the moment they saw an opening. Their thick, putrid stench assaulted the nose.

At least four hours remained before their spiritual powers would return. They didn't even know if the damaged array on the ground—which had been abandoned for years and repaired in haste—could hold for that long!

And the Yiling Patriarch was in the cave with them. They couldn't fathom why he hadn't made a move—perhaps he was waiting to kill them after he'd had his fun terrorizing them, like a cat toying with mice? But no one present could guarantee when or if Wei Wuxian would suddenly do any harm.

Their gazes fell on him anew.

"I already said you don't have to look at me like that," Wei Wuxian commented. "There are only two groups inside the Demon-Quelling Cave who still have their spiritual power. Hanguang-jun and I are one, and the kiddos who were captured and dragged up the mountain are the other. It's not unfair of me to say everyone else is powerless, right? If I wanted to do anything to you, could the kids stop me?"

Su She humphed. "Enough talk. Kill us if you must. If the people here are heroes, they won't cry out. Don't expect anyone to beg for your mercy either."

The moment he spoke, quite a number of people started grumbling. Only about twenty in this group of one thousand bore Wei Wuxian a real grudge. The rest had joined the siege on impulse when they heard about it; at best, they were righteous passersby who were aiding the campaign out of a sense of justice. All they wanted to do was follow the rest of the group's lead. If they managed to kill one or two of Wei Wuxian's fierce corpse lackeys, that would be an accomplishment, one they could boast of. But if it meant they needed to pay a real price…there were few people present who actually wanted to dip their toes in this muddy water.

Wei Wuxian glanced at him. "Real sorry, but who are you again?"

Veins bulged on Su She's forehead. He was just about to answer when Lan Jingyi loudly voiced a question.

"And then what? If it's not poison, what is it?"

Wei Wuxian immediately forgot all about Su She. "There's no reason everyone should have lost their spiritual power all at once. There had to have been a method, as well as an opportunity. You must've come into contact with something, or done something, before or during when you all were en route to the Burial Mounds. The kiddos were captured a few days ago, so the timing was staggered. Hanguang-jun and I didn't take the same path up the mountain, so our route differed as well. Can everyone think back on what they did?"

Amidst the sound of crickets, someone answered in a confused tone, "What's something we've all done… Before we headed up the Burial Mounds, did we all drink water? Gosh, I can't remember. I don't know."

Who among them would so obliviously respond to Wei Wuxian at a time like this, let alone do and think as he ordered? None save the Head-Shaker himself, Nie Huaisang.

Someone finally blurted, despite himself, "No one drank water on the way up! Who'd dare drink from a corpse mountain?"

Nie Huaisang started guessing at random. “So was it because we breathed in that fog?”

It certainly made sense that there could be something odd about the fog in the black forest. “That’s possible!” someone immediately agreed.

But Jin Ling refuted the suggestion just as quickly. “Impossible. The fog is thicker at the top of the mountain. We were trapped here for two days, and our spiritual powers are still intact.”

Su She seemed unable to listen to this any longer. “That’s enough! Do you all really want to discuss this with him? Is it fun, letting the enemy lead you around by the nose? He…”

His face changed all of a sudden, and his words came to an abrupt stop.

“Go on,” Wei Wuxian urged. “Why did you stop?”

The sect disciples of the Su Clan of Moling all shot to their feet.

“Sect Leader!”

“Sect Leader, what’s wrong?!”

Su She brushed aside the sect disciples who came over to assist him. He raised his hand, first to point at Wei Wuxian, then at Lan Wangji.

The sect disciple nearest to him fumed. “Wei Wuxian. What evil spell have you cast?!”

“That isn’t an evil spell!” Lan Sizhui tried to explain. “This is… It’s…”

Lan Wangji had been sitting to the side, poised and proper. He pressed his right hand to his guqin’s seven strings, halting their vibration. The babbling sect disciples suddenly made sounds like ducks being choked, and their clamor came to an abrupt end.

All the Lans present thought to themselves, *That’s the Lan Clan silence spell*…

Lan Wangji waited until quiet returned to the clamorous Demon-Quelling Cave before he turned to Wei Wuxian.

"Continue."

Rage filled Su She's eyes. His lips were pressed tight together, his voice was gone, and his throat was as parched as if it had been burned. But what frustrated him even more than not being able to verbally assault Wei Wuxian was the humiliation of being subjected to Lan Wangji's control.

He rubbed his throat repeatedly, attempting unsuccessfully to release the spell. He had no choice but to look pleadingly at Lan Qiren—who, to his surprise, remained stone-faced and didn't spare him a single glance. Lan Qiren could've released the spell, and Lan Wangji would not have cast it again out of respect for his position as an elder of the Lan family. But there was much discontent between the Su Clan of Moling and the Lan Clan of Gusu, which was why Lan Qiren showed no intent to help him by releasing the spell.

The people present understood, now. If anyone attempted to quarrel with Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji would seal their mouth. That terrified the crowd into silence. However, at times like these, there was always a brave soul who stepped forward, fearless in the face of death.

That very brave soul mocked, "Wei Wuxian—as expected of the Yiling Patriarch, eh? Such a bully. You're not even gonna let people talk now?"

"How weird," Wei Wuxian said.

"What's weird, Wei-qianbei?" Lan Sizhui asked.

"Sect Leader Su has been acting very weird since earlier," Wei Wuxian replied. "When the corpses attacked, he was calling for everyone who'd lost their spiritual powers to pass up a chance at survival and hurry off to their deaths. Now he's trying to gag me, not let me ask questions. Not to mention how he keeps trying to piss me off. It's like the very idea of you guys staying alive a single minute

longer scares him. What's the logic here? Is this how an ally should behave?"

Now that Wei Wuxian mentioned it, a shadow of doubt began to cloud many people's thoughts. Sect Leader Su *did* seem overly talkative today. But no one else had commented on it, and it wasn't their place to say anything, so they had prudently chosen to remain silent.

Another portion of the crowd, however, began to mentally review what they had done before coming up the mountain or while en route.

Wei Wuxian glanced at the sect disciples of the Su Clan of Moling, who were standing very far from the sect disciples of the Lan Clan of Gusu—the latter of whom weren't sparing the former a single glance. The more he observed both groups, the more he felt there was something awkward going on.

He whispered of his curiosity to Lan Wangji. "Hanguang-jun, lemme ask you something. The Lan Clan of Gusu and the Su Clan of Moling both cultivate through music, and Gusu and Moling aren't too far from each other in the Jiangnan region. Shouldn't you be on good terms? Why does it feel like the two clans are at odds?"

Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi scooted over, and Lan Jingyi provided a loud response. "Of course we're at odds!"

"The Su Clan of Moling split off from the Lan Clan of Gusu," Lan Wangji explained.

"What?" Wei Wuxian was surprised.

Lan Sizhui covered Lan Jingyi's mouth, and said in a low voice, "Wei-qianbei, you may not know this, but the Su Clan of Moling was established by a non-blood-related sect disciple who left the Lan Clan of Gusu. Because he couldn't shake off the influence of his former sect, his clan's secret techniques are all pretty much the same as those of the Lan Clan. They specialize in music, and Sect Leader Su Minshan's finest spiritual weapon is even a seven-stringed guqin that resembles Hanguang-jun's."

Shocked into speechlessness, Wei Wuxian turned to glance at the gloomy Su She. Lan Jingyi struggled free of Lan Sizhui's hold and humphed indignantly.

"That's not all. It gets weirder! Sect Leader Su… All right, I know I should be quieter, gosh! Sect Leader Su doesn't *just* copy everything—it's also a sore spot with him if you say he's just mimicking our Hanguang-jun. He gets really hostile about it. How can such a person really exist?!"

He was talking louder and louder. Resignedly, Lan Sizhui admonished him again. "Jingyi!"

However, Su She had already heard everything clearly. His face turned dark and steely. Anger burned in his eyes, and he coughed up a mouthful of blood, finally breaking the silence spell by force. But when he spoke, his voice was as raspy as if he had aged ten years.

"The Lan Clan of Gusu—a sect full of distinguished cultivators, indeed! Number one in the cultivation world, boasting the motto 'Elegance and Righteousness.' Is this what you teach your disciples?!"

Sect Leader Ouyang spoke up. "Sect Leader Su, we are currently facing a great foe. Let's not damage the camaraderie between our own people."

Su She sneered. "Our own people? Take a look at the Lan Clan. Every one of them is keeping Wei Wuxian's company—how are they 'our own people'?"

It made the rest of the Lan Clan visibly unhappy to hear him say that. Lan Qiren gave him a look but stayed silent.

One of the older, high-ranking guest cultivators of the Lan Clan spoke up, his expression surly. "Su Minshan. Even though you are no longer part of the Lan Clan, you must still watch what you say!"

One of the sect disciples of the Su Clan of Moling immediately stepped forward. "Our Sect Leader broke with the Lan Clan long

ago. What right do you have to speak to him that way?"

Lan Jingyi, who had long harbored grievances against the Su Clan of Moling, shouted back at them. "It's thanks to our Gusu education that your sect leader enjoys the status he has today! What, are we not allowed to say anything when he makes false accusations?"

Inside the Demon-Quelling Cave, the two groups traded angry glares and began to hurl scorn at each other.

Another person from the Su Clan yelled, "There are many sect disciples in the Lan Clan. Does every single one of them have the ability to start their own sect? Don't be so conceited!"

"Who's the one acting conceited?" someone from the Lan Clan immediately rebuffed. "Whose clan was it that remained blithely unaware of all the mistakes they made while playing their evil-repelling songs?!"

The moment he said that, it all became clear to Wei Wuxian!

"It wasn't food, and it wasn't the lay of the land on the way up here!" he said.

Everyone stopped, taken aback.

"Don't forget, there was another thing you all did after coming up the mountain," Wei Wuxian continued.

"What was that?" Lan Sizhui asked.

"Killed walking corpses," Wei Wuxian said.

"Ah, could it be like in Yi City, where the corpses had some sort of poisonous powder in their bodies?" Ouyang Zizhen blurted. "Dad, when you were killing those animated corpses, did weird-colored powder spray out of them?"

"There was no powder, nothing!" Sect Leader Ouyang stated.

Ouyang Zizhen pressed further, refusing to give up. "Then… then what about fluids?"

"Enough," Jiang Cheng coldly cut in. "We would have had to have been blind to not notice the walking corpses spraying strange powder or fluids when we killed them."

Ouyang Zizhen had thought he was onto something. Now, he could only flush and scratch at his ear. His father hurriedly pulled his overexcited son down to sit.

"It is certainly connected to killing walking corpses," Wei Wuxian said, "but the problem wasn't the corpses themselves—it was the ones doing the killing."

He turned to Lan Qiren. "Lan-lao-qianbei, may I ask you a question?"

Lan Qiren glanced at Lan Wangji and replied dispassionately, "Why not ask *him* if you have a question? Why ask me?"

While Lan Qiren was pedantic, he was not a reckless man. He had already sensed something was amiss but had remained patient and listened all this while. He was still making a sour face—but Wei Wuxian had seen him make all sorts of faces at him since he was young, and many other people had pulled faces at him since. He hadn't cared about such things for a long time. Considering Lan Qiren was the uncle who had raised Lan Wangji, there was even less to be angry about.

He stroked his chin and chuckled. "Of course, sir. I was just worried that you'd get mad if I asked him too many questions in front of you. But since you've given me the okay, I'll go ahead. Lan Zhan?"

"Mn," Lan Wangji answered.

"The Su Clan of Moling is a clan that split off from the Lan Clan of Gusu, right?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Mn," Lan Wangji answered in the affirmative.

"After they split off, the Su Clan used the Lan Clan as a reference for everything, including their strongest techniques. Correct?"

"Yes," Lan Wangji replied.

"One of the Lan Clan's secret techniques, the Eradication Tone, has evil-repelling effects. The seven-stringed guqin is considered the most superb and abstruse among instruments, which is also why the guqin arts are the most widely practiced among the cultivators in the clan. The Su Clan of Moling followed the Lan Clan's example, so their clan is also mostly composed of guqin cultivators, right?"

"Correct," Lan Wangji answered.

"The clan leader of the Su Clan of Moling left the Lan Clan of Gusu and established his own sect, but his own guqin skills were lacking. And so, the disciples he taught also make numerous mistakes while playing, right?"

"Yes," Lan Wangji answered calmly.

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji traded statements back and forth, asking questions and giving answers like no one else was around. Those who were listening gradually discovered that they weren't just making fun of Su She but, rather, peeling the layers off an onion. And so, they listened more and more seriously.

"…So even if there was something off about a section of the battle music the Su Clan played while killing walking corpses on the trek up to the Burial Mounds, the Lan Clan wouldn't think anything of it," Wei Wuxian slowly continued. "They would just write it off as the Su Clan making errors due to their poor technique and poor memory of the score. They'd never suspect the melody might be deliberately incorrect. Is that right?"

As he asked that last question, Su She's pupils contracted. Veins popped violently on the hand pressed to the hilt of his sword, which he'd secretly drawn half an inch out of its scabbard. At the same time, Lan Wangji raised his eyes and saw the mirrored understanding in Wei Wuxian's gaze.

He clearly enunciated each word of his answer. "That is correct."

Su She drew his sword in full with a *sching*. Wei Wuxian smiled and used two fingers to push aside the sharp tip of the blade.

"What're you doing? Don't forget you lost all your spiritual power. What's the use in threatening me, huh?"

Su She, sword raised, could neither stab nor withdraw. He clenched his teeth. "You two keep targeting me again and again. What are you trying to insinuate?!"

"Have I been too subtle in making my point? You thought I was *insinuating*?" Wei Wuxian asked curiously. "Let me make myself clearer, then. Everyone here lost their spiritual power because they all did one thing. What was that thing? Kill walking corpses. During the slaughter, Sect Leader Su of the Su Clan of Moling accompanied everyone all the way up the mountain. He pretended he was repelling evil with his guqin, but in fact, he had secretly altered part of the battle song into a melody that would make someone temporarily lose their spiritual power. He seemed to fight alongside you while you were all knee-deep in the bloodbath, but he was actually double-crossing you…"

"Slander!" Su She exclaimed.

"There are plenty of guqin cultivators from the Lan Clan here, right?" Wei Wuxian asked the crowd. "When you were going up the mountain, did you hear mistakes in the battle song played by the Su Clan?"

No one was more qualified to answer this question than the guqin cultivators of the Lan Clan of Gusu. They immediately responded in unison, "We did indeed!"

"Sect Leader Su, you know that many members of the Lan Clan wholly scorn the Su Clan, so you made use of that contempt," Wei Wuxian continued. "While evil songs can cause harm, they also come with certain requirements regarding the spiritual power of the one playing them. Of course there's no way your power alone could fuel a song that would cause nearly a thousand people to lose their spiritual power—which was why you brought along all the guqin

cultivators of your Su Clan and had them play with you! Of all the clans present, only the Lan Clan would notice something amiss, and they wouldn't pay it any mind. Even if they noticed you were playing the battle song incorrectly, they would just write it off as you being incompetent and poorly training your disciples as a result!"

Nie Huaisang gaped. "Are there really such wicked songs in the world? Ones that can make people lose their spiritual powers?!"

"How could there not be?" Wei Wuxian said. "The sound of the guqin can repel evil, so why can't it summon it? There's a collection of Dongying melodies called *Collection of Spirit Turmoil*. Documented within it are wicked songs that circulate in the land of Dongying. Some of the songs can even kill. Why couldn't there be one that makes people temporarily lose their spiritual power? Lan Qiren-qianbei is here, ask him. Is there such a volume inside the Room of Forbidden Books, underneath the Library Pavilion?"

Su She composed himself, then sneered. "Even if such songs exist, I wouldn't have been able to enter the Room of Forbidden Books during my time studying at the Lan Clan. I'd have no way to see those scores. And I've never set a single foot inside the Cloud Recesses since. Never have I heard of this book! But *you* certainly are familiar with this *Collection of Spirit Turmoil*, and you're also abnormally close to Hanguang-jun. Who's more likely to have come in contact with it—me or you?"

Wei Wuxian smiled. "Who said it had to be *you* who entered the Room of Forbidden Books? If your master could go in and out as he pleases, that would work fine too, no? He probably gave you the idea to tamper with the scores in the first place, right?"

An important figure with a great deal of authority, who could go in and out of the Cloud Recesses as he pleased. There was no need to spell out who Su She's master was. Everyone knew it could only be Lianfang-zun!

"What an ingenious plan the two of you hatched," Wei Wuxian said. "Capture the juniors of various clans and lure all these people

up the Burial Mounds—the mantis stalks the cicada, unaware of the oriole behind. He's using his injuries to avoid suspicion and as an excuse to not be here. The two of you have been colluding. One of you plays a wicked song to damage everyone's spiritual power, while the other uses the Yin Tiger Tally to manipulate the fierce corpses to besiege the mountain. In the end, thousands will be wiped out on my territory—and who would believe me if I said I didn't do it, right? You weren't scared of running into me either. Wei Wuxian has a notoriously bad rep. New grudges and old hate will come together, and in the midst of that frenzy, no one's gonna listen to me try to explain. Maybe it'll even provoke me into going on a killing spree—and wouldn't that save you the trouble of making the move yourselves?"

"Laughable," Su She said. "Lianfang-zun is already the Cultivation Chief and leader of the cultivation world. He has no need to fight you for power. What does he gain by having so many people deliver themselves to their deaths on your doorstep? Smear my name if you must, but how dare you slander Lianfang-zun!"

"If you're so convinced I'm slandering you, will *you* dare play the evil-repelling battle song the Su Clan of Moling was playing while climbing the mountain? Do it right here, in front of everyone," Wei Wuxian said.

All the guqin cultivators of the Lan Clan of Gusu were present. If Su She played something different from what they'd heard earlier, they'd call him out at once!

Within the Demon-Quelling Cave, people silently shifted farther and farther away from those of the Su Clan. The space they'd vacated unintentionally formed a large clearing, with the Su Clan isolated at its center.

Wei Wuxian seized this chance. "Won't do it? Fine, that's okay. Why don't you take a look at *this*, then?"

He retrieved two pieces of yellowing paper from his robes. He waved them, only letting people get a vague glimpse of the fact that

musical scores were written on the sheets.

"Did you really think we left Golden Carp Tower empty-handed? Inside the secret chamber behind the bronze mirror of Fragrance Palace, Jin Guangyao had hidden two pages torn from the *Collection of Spirit Turmoil.* And we found them. If we show them to Lan Qiren-qianbei and allow him to determine whether they match the melody you played, the truth will come out!"

Su She sneered. "You lie. How do I know if those aren't random scores you scribbled down just to slander me?"

"Would I carry two sheets of music around all day, solely on the off chance I could whip them out?" Wei Wuxian asked back. "Either way, Lan Qiren-qianbei can tell if it's a lie with a single look."

Su She had suspected deceit at first. Now, his brow wrinkled at the sight of Wei Wuxian's sly grin, as well as the certainty in his voice as Lan Qiren took the sheets.

He tensed and cried, "Lan-qianbei, watch out! It's a trap!" before he reached to snatch away the two papers.

Right then, the icy blue sword glare of Bichen struck at him. Su She drew his sword to block, but as soon as he did, he'd realized he'd been had!

Su She's sword was named "Nanping." As it clashed with Bichen, its sword glare blazed bright. It was very obviously brimming with spiritual power!

Wei Wuxian folded the two sheets of paper and tucked them back into his robes at once.

"Do my eyes deceive me? You actually still have spiritual power?" he said, feigning surprise. "Congrats, congrats. But dare I ask—if you had no devious scheme, then why did you hide the fact that you hadn't lost your spiritual power?"

Of course, those sheets of paper weren't pages from the *Collection of Spirit Turmoil* that they'd found in Golden Carp Tower. They were the score of the odd melody that Jin Guangyao had

played, which Lan Wangji had written out while inside the Room of Forbidden Books. He'd left a copy for Lan Xichen to reference, and Wei Wuxian had swiped both, keeping them on hand to fool people with. Now, he'd successfully made Su She both skeptical and anxious. And when Wei Wuxian added insult to injury by repeatedly mocking and provoking him, Su She had grown impatient, as expected. Lan Wangji had suddenly tested him without Wei Wuxian even needing to say anything, and Su She had let the cat out of the bag himself.

The crowd quickly dodged away from him. But they didn't need to—Lan Wangji moved the way Wei Wuxian talked, pressing at every step, giving his opponent no room to breathe. It took everything Su She had just to not fall and put himself at a disadvantage. Stumbling, he backed up until he hit the stairs. When he looked down, he saw the red spell array beneath his feet.

Lan Wangji's eyes sharpened.

Oh crap! He's gonna break the array that was just fixed! Wei Wuxian thought.

Sure enough, Su She bit his tongue and spat a mouthful of blood at the ground. The dense bloodstain covered the already dull, unclear red marks. Lan Wangji no longer had time for him—instead, he slashed his left hand with Bichen's sharp edge and attempted to redraw the array. Su She took this opportunity to hurl a talisman at the ground. A blast of blue flames and smoke erupted.

A Transportation Talisman!

The gravedigger from the Chang Clan of Yueyang's cemetery was familiar with Lan Clan sword techniques. Su She used to be a sect disciple of the Lan Clan, so he met that requirement. Su She was the smoke-masked man whom they had seen so many times!

Wei Wuxian crouched next to Lan Wangji. "How is it?"

Lan Wangji was using his bleeding fingers to draw on the ground, but after a while, he shook his head. The new blood had thoroughly covered the array and destroyed the spell. It could not be

repaired. Wei Wuxian took his hand and used his own sleeve to wipe away the blood and dirt on it.

"If it's not working, then leave it be."

The array was broken and on the verge of total collapse. The Su Clan of Moling's sect disciples were all clearly confused, so it seemed Su She never told them that they were playing the wrong song—nor how to avoid losing their spiritual power. Which meant the Su Clan disciples were originally meant to die, just like everyone else. They huddled together, terrified the rest of the group would blame them and seek vengeance. However, panic had descended upon the Demon-Quelling Cave. No one had time to try and get even with them.

Several family heads grabbed their sons and exhorted them, "When the corpse horde charges in here in a few minutes, think of a way to escape. You have to live on, no matter what! Understand?!"

Jin Ling cringed when he heard them, though deep down, he hoped his own uncle would say the same. He waited for a long time, shooting Jiang Cheng looks when he said nothing of the sort. He stared so hard that Jiang Cheng finally turned his gaze on him. The gloom weighing down his brows had eased a little, but the furrow between them had not.

"What's wrong with your eyes?"

"…Nothing!" Jin Ling unhappily snapped back.

Wei Wuxian tore off a clean strip of his sleeve to wipe and wrap the injury on Lan Wangji's hand. A figure suddenly rushed at them from behind, swinging their sword down. Lan Wangji reached out with his right hand and flicked—there was a metallic sound as he slapped the impertinent blade aside with his bare hand.

Wei Wuxian squinted. "You again?"

The force of the slap shocked the man back a few steps, making him fall to the ground. It was Yi Weichun. His eyes were bloodshot as he brandished his sword once more.

"Wei Wuxian, I don't believe a single word you just said!"

"The cat's outta the bag. Su She flashed his sword glare and then ran off. What part of it do you not believe?" Wei Wuxian asked.

But Yi Weichun simply swung his sword again, screaming, "I don't believe you! I don't believe anything you say!"

Someone blinded by hatred would refuse to accept anything that could be beneficial to the enemy.

Just then, panic-stricken cries came from ahead of them. "It's broken!"

"The array is broken!"

"They're coming in!"

Wen Ning sent a row of raggedly dressed fierce corpses flying with his bare hands, but he was only a force of one. After the loss of the blood array barrier, there was nothing to stop the horde of corpses from swarming into the Demon-Quelling Cave like a black tide. The putrid smell of rot and the sound of snarls filled the vast cavern in an instant!

Jin Ling had never seen so many fierce corpses before, and at such close range. Despite himself, his hair stood on end and his grip on Suihua tightened. Suddenly, someone peeled open his fingers and stuffed something cold into his palm. He looked down and was stunned.

"Jiujiu?"

Jiang Cheng rose to his feet with the support of a powerless Sandu, his body swaying with the effort. "Just try losing Zidian, if you dare!"

Lan Sizhui, Lan Jingyi, and the rest rushed forward, wielding their swords.

"Ghost General! We've come to your aid!"

Sect Leader Ouyang could neither stand up nor hold his son back. "Zizhen, wait!" he yelled.

Ouyang Zizhen swung his sword with all his might, turning his head back to shout, "Don't be scared, Dad! I'll protect you!"

But the moment he turned his head, a wizened claw went straight for his throat. *"Zizhen!"* Sect Leader Ouyang screamed desperately, consumed by terror.

A sword lopped off the claw in the nick of time. Lan Qiren caught Ouyang Zizhen and threw him back into the crowd. Leading a group of Lan Clan sword cultivators, he charged forth to kill. He had been resting for a while, so he'd recovered more of his strength than the others, and his blade was fierce and sharp. Many of the spectators' jaws dropped in surprise.

Lan Sizhui swung his sword like the wind. Suddenly, metal clashed behind him—someone had helped block a strike at his back. Lan Sizhui was astonished.

"Jin-gongzi, why are you here too?"

As it turned out, when Jin Ling saw others the same age as him join the charge, he couldn't sit still anymore. When Jiang Cheng wasn't paying attention, he stuffed the silver ring Zidian back into his hand and squeezed out of the crowd, rushing to the entrance of the cave—the most dangerous area.

Jiang Cheng had tried to chase after him, but he could only stumble a few steps. He tried swinging his sword, only to feel like Sandu weighed a thousand pounds. Two female corpses tackled him, one on his left and one on his right. Jiang Cheng swore and raised his sword to keep fighting. However, another pair of hands ripped the two corpses to pieces.

"Sect Leader Jiang…"

Jiang Cheng flew into a rage when he heard that voice. "Get the fuck away from me!" He kicked Wen Ning aside and roared, *"Jin Ling!"*

Lan Jingyi shuddered. "I think you better go back! Your uncle is gonna eat everyone here alive."

Jiang Cheng's roar was more terrifying than the fierce corpses, but Jin Ling ignored it. "*You* go back!"

Ouyang Zizhen did not remain in his father's grip for long before he charged over again, sword in hand. "Wooow! I had no idea that Lan Qiren-xiansheng knew how to use a sword. He's so awesome at it too!"

Lan Jingyi responded as loudly as he always did. "*Of course!* Who do you think taught Hanguang-jun and Zewu-jun the art of the sword before they were sixteen?!"

Sect Leader Ouyang forced himself to swing his sword." What are you waiting for?" he yelled at the people who still stood petrified inside the cave. "If you don't fight, then it's certain death. The juniors are fighting, what are you sitting around for?!"

Influenced by the sight of the boys fighting as hard as they could, more and more people drew their swords, using whatever strength and spiritual power they had left to join in the battle. Gradually, the dense horde of corpses surrounding the cave was blown into scattered rows. About an hour later, those rows became groups of twos and threes. The situation was actually turning in their favor!

By the time Lan Wangji had slashed the last grasping fierce corpse in twain, the corpses inside the cave were piled as high as a mountain, and blood flowed like rivers.

Everyone was covered in bloody filth that had long since congealed and crusted. Their lungs were choked with the powerful stench of blood. After the hard-won battle, many had already collapsed to the ground, unable to get up—barely different from the dead bodies littered about. The only ones who remained standing with the support of their swords were a handful of clan leaders and energetic youths.

Lan Jingyi stared blankly into space, his face pale. "I…I've never killed so many walking corpses before… All by myself, I killed at least thirty, no, forty…"

"Me…too…" Ouyang Zizhen agreed.

Then, like the boys had planned it, they dropped to the ground at the same time with a *thud*, never wanting to rise again.

Holding himself upright out of sheer willpower, Jiang Cheng walked to Jin Ling and grabbed the boy. "Were you injured?!"

Even the heavy breaths Jin Ling heaved carried a metallic scent. "No, I…"

Jiang Cheng immediately smacked him to the ground. "No?! Then I'll *give* you some injuries to teach you a lesson! Stinkin' brat, you think my words are nothing but empty air?!" he scolded.

But he couldn't stay upright after that swing either, and was forced to sit down heavily. As he panted, his gaze wandered to the two standing near the opening of the Demon-Quelling Cave.

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were both filthy. Wei Wuxian was wearing black, so he didn't look too bad, but Lan Wangji's white robes were now dyed various shades of black and red—a terrifying sight. Only his extraordinarily meaningful forehead ribbon was still mostly clean. He gripped Bichen in his hand, its blade still steadily coursing with spiritual power.

This was the first time those present had seen such an unkempt Hanguang-jun, but no one had the mind to care about that at a time like this.

"Is it…over…?" someone asked.

At the sound of that voice, everyone had the same thought. *Nie Huaisang actually survived a fight like that and still talks with such energy—what a miracle*.

No one had the energy to answer him, but Nie Huaisang was practically weeping tears of joy.

"Oh thank heavens, the horde is finally defeated! What blessings from the ancestors that I was able to survive disaster!"

His emotions were infectious, and the boys also started cheering. One by one, more and more joined in on the celebration. Over on the Lan Clan's side, however, someone gasped in alarm.

"Xiansheng!"

Lan Qiren's voice immediately followed. "No need to help me!"

Lan Wangji looked over and saw Lan Qiren coughing up more blood. After dismissively waving off the concern, Lan Qiren sat down in the lotus position and began to regulate his breathing. Lan Wangji swiftly approached and briefly checked his pulse, but he was met with protest just as he was about to channel spiritual power to him.

"No need! My spiritual power has not yet returned. Your efforts will be in vain, like dropping an ox made of mud into the sea."

Lan Wangji withdrew his hand and rose to his feet.

"What should we do about this, Hanguang-jun?" the guest cultivators asked him out of habit.

It was only after the question was posed that they realized the impropriety of what they'd done. However, Lan Qiren was resting, eyes closed, and showed no sign of caring.

"Take a moment to rest. Check for casualties. Treat the wounded without delay," Lan Wangji answered.

He had always possessed incredible authority within the Lan Clan of Gusu, and the sect disciples were greatly reassured. With even more energy than before, they answered in unison, "Yes, sir!"

Before they could move, however, Wei Wuxian suddenly spoke up.

"Quiet."

He looked serious. The people immediately fell silent. Those who were excitedly cheering also fell quiet, one by one, gazing disquietedly at him. There was not a sound inside the Demon-Quelling Cave, aside from that of soft breathing.

Against this stillness, another sound was becoming increasingly clear.

It came from outside the Demon-Quelling Cave—the sound of feet crunching withered branches and leaves underfoot.

It wasn't just one person either. There were endless footsteps, crammed and packed together.

The people inside the Demon-Quelling Cave didn't even dare breathe anymore. Countless fearful eyes turned to the cavern's entrance. Something was slowly moving through the black woods, creeping along. It was hazy, obscured by darkness, barely visible. But, accompanied by the sound of trudging footsteps, that something became progressively clearer—until all present could plainly see the ghastly white faces, the wizened hands, and the fangs in varying shades of red and yellow.

It was a new wave of corpses.

And it was an even bigger horde than the one before!

The people inside the Demon-Quelling Cave had thought survival was in sight. Now, a monstrous sense of despair devoured the entire cave in an instant, and doom enveloped all present. Even Jin Ling, Lan Sizhui, and the other boys were left petrified, chilled to the bone by hopelessness. Some simply fainted, seemingly unable to accept that their hopes had been dashed so swiftly. Some started to weep feebly. But no one had the energy to stand with sword in hand and keep fighting.

Even if Wen Ning stood guard at the cave's entrance again, how long could he last on his own?

Suddenly, Wei Wuxian called, "Hanguang-jun!"

Lan Wangji looked back at him. Wei Wuxian took a breath, then stated, "I want to do something."

His words drew the attention of the others present.

"Will you accompany me?" Wei Wuxian added.

Lan Wangji gazed right at him. His answer was clear and decisive.

"Yes."

Wei Wuxian broke into a wide smile and stripped off his black outer robe. Under it was a white inner robe that was already half dyed red. However, that didn't stop him from smearing a few lines on it with his bloodstained hand.

As the pattern he drew became clearer and clearer, those watching him work grew progressively more filled with disbelief, like they were watching some sort of monster.

Fang Mengchen stood up, then and there. "What are you doing?" he exclaimed in dismay.

Wei Wuxian ignored him and continued with his drawing.



By the time he finished, it was no longer a white robe he was wearing but a bright, conspicuous flag.

A flag that drew the attention of all nefarious creatures to a single target—a Spirit-Attraction Flag!

Wei Wuxian stood next to Lan Wangji, then waved at Lan Sizhui and the other boys to beckon them over. The juniors gathered around. Jin Ling wanted to get up as well but was pushed back down by Jiang Cheng.

"In a few minutes, when the second wave of corpses breaks in, I'll lure them to the Blood Pool. Hanguang-jun will be in charge of striking them down. This," he said before patting his heart, "will be their target. They won't pay attention to you. Do not get distracted by fighting; focus only on getting out."

Lan Sizhui raised his voice for once. "What?! No! Absolutely not!"

Sect Leader Ouyang had given up on keeping his son reined in by now, so Ouyang Zizhen joined in the chorus. "Wei-qianbei, we want to kill walking corpses too! I can kill another hundred of them!"

Lan Jingyi, on the other hand, was already stripping off his own clothes. "I'm gonna draw a flag on myself too!"

Torn between laughing and crying, Wei Wuxian quickly stopped him. "All right, that's enough, stop messing around. One target is enough. Hanguang-jun working with me to strike down walking corpses is enough. Don't add to this mess, you lot."

Faced with this situation, everyone inside the Demon-Quelling Cave was at a complete loss. They all knew what a Spirit-Attraction Flag did. And even if there *was* someone willing to use their own flesh and blood to attract the corpse horde that was about to break through the array, sacrificing themselves for the safety of others… surely that someone would never be Wei Wuxian!

Lan Sizhui and the other juniors were about to keep talking, but Lan Wangji stopped them. "Heed him."

Then he turned to Lan Qiren and bowed deeply. Lan Qiren opened his eyes but didn't speak.

"Lan-xiansheng! Hanguang-jun, he…he…" Lan Sizhui said anxiously.

"This is how it should be," Lan Qiren said impassively.

Lan Sizhui wanted to say more. "But…!"

"Wen Ning! Open the path!" Wei Wuxian shouted.

The black lines spreading from Wen Ning's neck instantly grew, crawling across nearly half his face. He no longer blocked the corpses from entering but let loose a long howl and tore through the thick of the horde to open a path.

With the barrier gone, the second wave of corpses set foot in the Demon-Quelling Cave.

Wei Wuxian gave Lan Sizhui a push, urging him, "Go!"

He turned and ran toward the Blood Pool. Lan Wangji never left his side, running with him shoulder to shoulder. As expected, the blood-red Spirit-Attraction Flag drawn on his white robe was the best possible target. Not a single fierce corpse paid any attention to the living humans in the cave, completely ignoring them even as they brushed past. Every pair of bloodshot eyes was locked on Wei Wuxian as they charged at him.

Wave after wave of corpses advanced. Every path Wen Ning opened was swiftly filled again by the shambling dead, forcing him to push back again and open another. Only about half the people inside the Demon-Quelling Cave had been successfully evacuated; the remainder included those who had yet to regain enough energy to walk. They saw the sword glare of Bichen sweeping across the cave at random, but whenever a row of fierce corpses was cut down, a new row quickly took their place. Ghastly wails echoed to the heavens, almost breaking through the domed ceiling of the Demon-Quelling Cave.

It didn't take long before a wave of corpses surrounded Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, making it hard for them to approach the Blood Pool. As the mountain of corpses piled higher and higher, the clear ground surrounding them continued to shrink. The juniors, fretting terribly at the sight, drew their swords and turned back around.

Lan Jingyi spied someone cutting down corpses as they rushed outside. "Will you please help? If you can still wield a sword, please help! Every little bit helps!"

"Screw you!" the man yelled.

"Never mind, Jingyi. We'll just rely on ourselves!" Lan Sizhui said.

Hearing their voices, Wei Wuxian yelled, "Wen Ning! Throw them outside!"

"Yes, sir!" Wen Ning grabbed Lan Jingyi with one hand and was just about to grab Lan Sizhui with the other when Lan Sizhui stopped him.

"Ghost General, I can't go. Let me stay! Otherwise, I will regret it for the rest of my life!"

The moment they came face-to-face, Wen Ning froze. Seeing he wasn't coming after him anymore, Lan Sizhui immediately fought his way back into the cave. Lan Jingyi and the others also seized this chance to hurry past Wen Ning. Jin Ling, meanwhile, was being half dragged and half carried out of the cave by Jiang Cheng, brushing past multiple fierce corpses in the process. The fierce corpses in question were being baited by the Spirit-Attraction Flag on Wei Wuxian, their red eyes focused solely on him. They completely ignored everyone else.

Jin Ling cried out, "Jiujiu! I…"

"If you dare go back in there, don't bother calling me your jiujiu anymore!" Jiang Cheng said coldly.

Jin Ling's head shot up to look at him, but Jiang Cheng threw him out of the cave with a shout of, *"Stay put!"* Then he charged back into the Demon-Quelling Cave with Sandu in his grip.

Jin Ling was taken aback. "Jiujiu, wait for me!" he cried, and followed him all the same.

Meanwhile, inside the Demon-Quelling Cave, the circle of clear ground surrounding Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had shrunk to a radius of less than three meters.

Bichen's sword glare was bright as always, and the talismans' flames blazed ceaselessly. However, there really were too many fierce corpses!

Wei Wuxian had just hurled out a handful of talismans when his sharp senses detected danger. He turned his head to look. Sure enough, a fierce corpse had climbed onto the pile of bodies nearby, which was as tall as a grown man—and it was pouncing at him, mouth wide open. Wei Wuxian's hands were empty. He cursed and rummaged in his sleeves, but found nothing. His heart lurched violently.

He'd run out of spell talismans!

Lan Wangji, noticing the danger Wei Wuxian was in, was just about to reverse his grip and strike when there was a sudden screech. The fierce corpse had been split in two in midair!

No. It had been *torn* in two. And the thing that had done it was right in front of everyone's eyes!

A fierce corpse that was utterly drenched in crimson blood stood atop the man-sized heap of bodies. Each hand held one half of the still-convulsing corpse that had just tried to attack Wei Wuxian. Its head was lowered, and it was looking down at Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji.

Lan Jingyi's jaw dropped so low that his mouth could no longer close.

"…Oh, *ancestors*… What is that thing?" Ouyang Zizhen muttered.

That was the exact thought running through everyone's minds. *What is that thing?!*

This strange corpse, which had appeared out of nowhere, was unlike any fierce corpse they had seen before. It dripped with scarlet blood from head to toe, as if it had just crawled out of the Blood Pool. It was nothing but skin and bones, and abnormally hideous, to boot.

The mob of corpses controlled by the Yin Tiger Tally were also drawn to this strange peer. They gave up on surrounding Wei Wuxian and looked at the bloody corpse with seeming trepidation instead.

The bloody corpse took two steps forward.

It swayed as it walked, its joints cracking almost like it was stretching its extremities. Dark red blood dripped from its limbs and body, leaving a trail in its wake.

Poignantly hostile yin energy overflowed from its body, as well as intense resentment. As it gradually approached, the other fierce corpses began to creep backward. A number of the living humans who remained were pale as ash, terrified into silence.

Lan Wangji stood in front of Wei Wuxian to shield him, but Wei Wuxian pushed down the hand gripping Bichen.

"…Wait," he said in a low voice.

He stared hard at the bloody corpse, a theory surfacing in his mind. His heart started to pound wildly, and he repeated, "Wait."

The bloody corpse stopped about three meters away from the two of them. It suddenly tossed its head back and let loose two long howls.

The second howl was shriller than the first. The living covered their ears.

Small ripples began to appear on the surface of the Blood Pool.

At first, it was like a rock had been tossed into the pool. But the ripples continued to expand, growing wider and wider, like something restless lurked beneath the viscous blood.

Suddenly a hand broke through the surface. It seized the shore, fingers digging deep into the ground. What surfaced next was a scarlet face, its features half-decayed and indistinct.

A second bloody corpse had crawled out of the Blood Pool.

Soon after, the surface of the crimson pool began to swirl and agitate like it was boiling. *Splash, splash*. Head after head floated to the surface of the water. A third, a fourth, a fifth… Every single one was stained by the terrifying filth of blood, wore faces most hideous, and snarled shrilly as they surfaced.

As soon as they crawled out of the Blood Pool, they started to fight the other fierce corpses. It was as if a whirlwind of sharp red knives had descended upon the mob of corpses controlled by the Yin Tiger Tally. The horde was reduced to a flying mess of minced meat, body parts, and black blood.

Jin Ling was visibly shaken. "…What are those things?! Why does the Blood Pool have fierce corpses in it? Weren't all the fierce corpses on the Burial Mounds burned to ash?!"

Sect Leader Ouyang was shielding his son, who stood next to him. "Some were not!"

"Which ones weren't?!" Lan Jingyi asked.

"The…the…" Sect Leader Ouyang replied.

He couldn't say it.

When the last survivors of the Wen Clan living on the Burial Mounds were killed during the siege, their fifty-odd corpses had been thrown into the Blood Pool!

Jin Ling cried out all of a sudden. "Watch out!"

A blood-red figure had landed in front of Lan Sizhui. He brandished his sword and backed a couple steps away as the blood corpse slowly rose to its feet.

The figure was smaller than the others and stood hunched over. There was a gaping hole in its skull, suggesting it had been bludgeoned to death. Soaking in the bloody water had left its sparse white hair stuck to its forehead, and with its skin and flesh half decayed on top of that, it was a repulsive, terrifying, and uncomfortable sight to behold. After it crawled to its feet, it began to hobble toward Lan Sizhui. Fear-stricken, the juniors hurried to gather around him.

Now that the living had increased in number, the bloody corpses grew wary and huffed deep within their throats. The boys tensed like they were facing a great foe, but Lan Sizhui quickly ordered them otherwise.

"Don't move!"

While he was also a little nervous, for some reason, he wasn't scared.

If this skinny, bloody little corpse had eyes, it would have been staring right at him. It tilted its head and extended its hand. It slowly reached toward Lan Sizhui, seeming to want to touch him. Its hand was filthy with blood and looked like a chicken foot that had been gnawed to pieces. The boys got goosebumps all over.

Jin Ling brandished his sword, wanting to stop the corpse, but Lan Sizhui blurted, "Jin-gongzi, don't!"

"Then what should we do?" Jin Ling demanded.

"Don't…don't move, anyone," Lan Sizhui said.

The bloody corpse let out a few faint cries. After steadying himself, Lan Sizhui also slowly extended his hand toward it.

Just as he was about to touch it, a new wave of corpses swarmed in. The blood corpse snapped its head around and let loose a long howl. It leapt into the air and tackled the horde, tearing and

biting like it had gone mad. Blood and flesh flew everywhere. Its roar was loud and clear and horrible, its actions swift and ferocious—a complete change from the way it had just behaved in front of Lan Sizhui.

Wen Ning hurled a number of fierce corpses to the ground. He was shaking as he shouted to the bloody corpse, "Is it you?!"

The bloody corpse ignored him.

The bloody corpses tore through the fierce corpses like they'd gone mad, and Wen Ning yelled to them, *"Is it you?!"*

The Demon-Quelling Cave was filled with shrill cries, high and low, but not a single one answered him. Not a single one could.

Hardly an hour later, all the voices came to a gradual stop.

Now that it was all over, the Demon-Quelling Cave was the very image of hell as shown in paintings. The bloody corpses began to slowly move, gathering where Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji stood. They were of various heights, sexes, and ages. Each was a bloody, malicious ghost from the bowels of hell. But in those figures, Wei Wuxian saw familiar shadows.

"Si-shu…" Wen Ning murmured. "Granny…"

He called to them, one by one, and the more he called, the more his voice trembled.

"Have you been waiting here all this time?" Wen Ning asked.

If he'd been alive, his eyes would surely be red and welling with tears.

Wei Wuxian's lips quivered. He wanted to say something. But in the end, no words were uttered.

He dipped his head low and gave a solemn bow.

"…Thank you," he croaked, his voice raspy.

Lan Wangji also bowed.

The group of bloody corpses had been full of ferocity when they were on their killing spree just moments ago. But as they stood face-to-face with Wei Wuxian, though their visages remained hideous, their actions now became almost clumsy and out of sync. Some bowed, while others raised their hands, as they returned the courtesy.

And then, as if something had sucked the spirit and life from them, they collapsed in a heap.

The blood-red bodies cracked like fragile porcelain wares. The fractures spiderwebbed outward, inch by inch, leaving increasingly smaller fragments. If a gust of wind blew past, nothing of them would remain.

Wen Ning threw himself to the ground to gather the bright red ashes with his hands. Grabbing handful upon handful, he stuffed them quickly into his robes until his clothing was full of ashes. At the sight of this, Lan Jingyi scratched his head and then untied one of his own perfume sachets. He dumped out the scented filling inside before crouching next to Wen Ning to hand him the bag.

"Here!"

Seeing this, the other boys all followed suit. Only Jin Ling didn't move. He just watched, looking at the other boys, then at Wen Ning, his expression complicated and his brow clouded by frost. He stepped farther away.

As for Wen Ning, with so many perfume sachets and cloth bags being handed to him, he was suddenly at a loss for what to do.

"Do you need help, Ghost General?" Lan Sizhui asked.

"Oh no, you…" Wen Ning quickly said.

"There're so many bones and ashes, can you collect everything by yourself?!" Lan Jingyi chimed in.

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji walked over. "Don't just start grabbing things at random," Wei Wuxian chided. "You'll get corpse poisoning if you don't wear gloves."

The boys finally abandoned the idea when they heard him.

"Wei-qianbei, Hanguang-jun, and Ghost General, thank you so much for…" Lan Sizhui started.

"Thank you for what?" a cold voice came suddenly from the crowd.

Lan Sizhui and the others turned their heads. The one who had spoken was Fang Mengchen.

"What the heck is this?" he demanded furiously, standing up.

Lan Sizhui was confused. "What the heck is what?"

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji gazed toward him as well.

"I'm asking you, what the heck is *this*?" Fang Mengchen harshly demanded. "Atonement? You cannot actually be feeling grateful to him!"

Dead silence filled the Demon-Quelling Cave. Not so much as a whisper could be heard.

Everyone was upset and struggling to take things in. They had come with great fanfare to launch a siege but ultimately been the ones besieged. They had shouted at the top of their lungs that they were here to stamp out evil, but in the end, they had to rely on "evil" to save their own lives.

They didn't know if they should call this absurd, bizarre, awkward, or baffling. All they knew was that in this grand theater of righteous indignation, they, who had jumped up and down so furiously, hadn't been honorable in the least.

It felt far too outrageous to tell Wei Wuxian they were grateful to his face. But he had saved them, after all, so it also didn't seem appropriate to tell him they *weren't* grateful. Given the circumstances, the best action was apparently maintaining their silence.

When no one answered him, Fang Mengchen fumed even more and then lunged with his sword. "Did you think making a show

of repentance with a few good deeds could repay the blood debt you owe?!"

Wei Wuxian dodged his attack. Someone from the crowd tried to mediate.

"Fang-xiong! Don't get so riled up. Just forget it…"

The moment the man said that, he immediately realized he'd misspoken. Sure enough, Fang Mengchen's eyes flashed red.

"Forget it?! What do you mean 'forget it'?! Can my family's murder be forgotten just because you said so?!" He continued with a booming voice, "Wei Wuxian killed my parents—that is the truth. So why does he suddenly seem to be everyone's hero?! Can his actions be so easily forgotten once he does a few good deeds? What do my parents count for, then?!"

Within the crowd, Jin Ling clenched his fists. There was a sudden twinge of pain in his shoulder—it was Jiang Cheng, who was gradually tightening the fingers of the hand he had laid there.

Jin Ling couldn't see his expression, but he called out to him in a whisper. "Jiujiu…"

Jiang Cheng let out a grim, indiscernible chuckle.

Wei Wuxian spoke up. "What exactly do you want, then?"

Fang Mengchen blinked, and Wei Wuxian continued.

"What do you want? You want nothing but to see me meet a miserable end so you can satisfy your hatred. That's all."

He pointed at Yi Weichun, who remained unconscious in the crowd. "He lost a leg, I was torn to shreds; you lost your parents, but my family's long dead. I am but a stray dog driven from my home. I never saw a single grain of my parents' ashes. Do you still hate the Wen survivors? The evil Wen survivors you all spoke of already died once, thirteen years ago. And just now, right here—for my sake, for the sake of saving you—they died again. This time, they're gone for good. Poof. So please enlighten me. What more do you *want*?"

Fang Mengchen glared hard at him. After a while, he gritted his teeth. "It's no use. Let me tell you, Wei Wuxian—no matter what you do, don't expect me to forgive you. Or forget the murder of my parents." He raised his voice to shout, declaring, *"I never will!"*

"No one's telling you to forgive me," Wei Wuxian said. "You're not the only ones who remember what I've done. *I* remember too. You won't forget—what makes you think I will?!"

As they stared at each other, Fang Mengchen felt himself grow discouraged. Mixed emotions swirled within him. Wei Wuxian and his gang had indeed saved his life, but he was reluctant to let go of his grudge for the sake of that alone. And yet…even if he wanted to seek revenge on Wei Wuxian, he lacked the power and strength to do it.

In the end, he could only let out a loud yell before turning around and storming out of the Demon-Quelling Cave.

Once he was gone, someone spoke up. "There won't be any more waves of corpses coming, right? Are we safe for real this time?!"

The crowd's heads spun at the sound of that voice. *Him again?!*

Nie Huaisang looked around. Seeing no one answer him, he added, "Then does that mean…we can go now?"

That question was certainly the right one. No one could wait to pin wings to their backs and fly home on their swords.

"Four hours must have passed by now," one of the female cultivators said. "How far have people's spiritual powers recovered?"

A number of people took out talismans to confirm whether they could ignite them with their spiritual powers. One after the other, the talismans were feebly set alight, and they called out their answers to the question that had been posed.

"Mine is around twenty percent recovered."

"Ten percent for me…"

"It's coming back so slowly!"

When they'd first set out on this expedition, they'd all thought the campaign would exceed the first Siege of the Burial Mounds that had taken place thirteen years ago. They had been certain it would be a tragedy for the history books. And yet, the number of people descending the mountain would ultimately be much the same as the number who had ascended. This second "Siege" certainly *would* be recorded in the history books—not because it was tragic, but rather, because it was absolutely the most ridiculous, the most hilarious, and the most nonsensical campaign the cultivation world had ever conducted.

Some were just thankful to have made it out alive, while others marveled at the winds of change. Several dozen clan leaders gathered together, and after a brief discussion, came to a unanimous agreement. To avoid unnecessary complications or unforeseen incidents, they would find a safe location to rally and regroup until everyone had recovered at least eighty percent of their power. Only then would they return to their own respective clans.

It took Wei Wuxian no time at all to realize that the closest "safe location" to Yiling was, of course, the domain of the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng.

"So you guys are planning on heading to Lotus Pier?" he asked.

Lan Qiren was leery. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason, I'm just asking," Wei Wuxian said. "Can I tag along?"

"Wei Wuxian!" Sect Leader Yao exclaimed warily. "You may have done a good deed today, but that's an entirely different matter. Let us be clear—it is impossible for us to associate with you."

Wei Wuxian was rendered speechless. "Don't you worry, no one's forcing you to associate with me. But we're technically on the same side right now, no? The big shot who plotted to murder all of

you today has the Yin Tiger Tally in his grasp. Think you guys can handle it?”

The clan leaders traded looks of dismay. Truthfully, Wei Wuxian was not wrong. If he was willing to join their alliance, he would surely be a great help. But they’d all been calling for the death of the Yiling Patriarch for so many years—they couldn’t suddenly or easily swallow their pride and work with him.

Lan Wangji turned to Lan Qiren. “Shufu, is there any news of my elder brother?”

“No,” Lan Qiren replied after a brief silence.

“Zewu-jun might still be under Jin Guangyao’s control,” Wei Wuxian said. “Lan-xiansheng, every bit of help counts. Even if you have your concerns about me, at least let Hanguang-jun participate in what you plan to do next. This concerns his elder brother, after all.”

With a weary look on his face, Lan Qiren said to Lan Wangji, “…Come if you must.”

The rest of the group immediately turned their eyes to Jiang Cheng. Lan Qiren was the most distinguished elder of the three clans present, and he had made his stance known. Taking Nie Huaisang’s support for any side into consideration would be a waste of time, so all eyes were now on Jiang Cheng.

He stood at the other end of the cavern, engaged in channeling his spiritual power anew to test Zidian. Its current was sporadic; sometimes sparking to life, sometimes dimming, but at least it wasn’t completely dead. Purple light illuminated Jiang Cheng’s face, making him appear cryptic and unreadable. Everyone knew that Sect Leader Jiang had fallen out with Wei Wuxian years ago and could hardly stand the sight of him. They thought he would put an end to the discussion, but to their surprise, Jiang Cheng only sneered.

“You dare return to Lotus Pier?”

Having tossed out that random question, he said nothing more. Everyone was left baffled, unsure whether that was a yes or a no. But when the group set off and Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji joined their ranks, Jiang Cheng didn’t spare them a single glance. They took that to mean he neither agreed nor disagreed.

— Part 2 —

NIGHT HAD FALLEN by the time the group reached the foot of the mountain. When they returned to town, the lights had been extinguished, and it was quiet all around. Everyone was in a sorry state, drained in both body and spirit. Even their marching formations were wobbly and askew, the rows uneven. But after using the last vestiges of their strength to do a headcount, they were heartened to find their numbers had hardly changed from when they first set out.

Since most of the group hadn't fully recovered their spiritual powers, they couldn't ride swords. Travel by water was the fastest route to Lotus Pier, so the travel-weary band of thousands headed toward the harbor near Yiling. But because the decision to set off had been made on such short notice, not many boats could be rounded up quickly enough. The clan leaders had to rent every single boat at the docks regardless of size, even fishing boats. They stuffed the vessels to full capacity with the various clans' disciples and set off down the river.

Dozens of juniors from prominent clans had all been squeezed onto one fishing boat. The boys, raised in prestigious households, had never been forced onto such a decrepit, creaky vessel. The boat was old and dismal, piled everywhere with filthy nets and buckets that reeked of fish. The wind was stronger at night, making the boats rock up and down and side to side. Several boys who hailed from the dry north came down with bad cases of queasiness, and though they tried to endure it, could eventually no longer hold it in. They all dashed out of the cabin and heaved before slumping back into dizzy heaps on the deck.

"Argh, for heaven's sake," one of the boys complained. "All this rocking is raising waves in my stomach! Hey, Sizhui-xiong, you're

throwing up too? Aren't you from Gusu? You're not a northerner, so why are you puking even harder than me?"

Lan Sizhui waved dismissively, looking sickly green. "I…I don't know why either. I've been like this since I was four or five, every time I'm on a boat… Maybe I was born this way."

As he spoke, queasiness surged within him again. He pulled himself upright with the support of the boat railing. Just as he was about to vomit some more, he suddenly saw a pitch-black figure clinging to the boat just below the railing. Half the man's body was submerged in the river water, and he was staring straight at Lan Sizhui.

In that split second, Lan Sizhui was so scared he swallowed back down everything he was about to vomit. His hand had just reached the hilt of his sword when he managed to take a closer look.

"Ghost…" he gasped.

Inside the cabin, Jin Ling caught that word and charged out wielding his sword. "Where's the ghost? Where? I'll kill it for you!"

"It's not a ghost," Lan Sizhui explained, "it's the Ghost General!"

The boys swarmed onto the deck and looked where Lan Sizhui was pointing. Sure enough, the Ghost General Wen Ning was the shadowy black figure who clung to the boat just below the railing, visible from where they stood.

Wen Ning had vanished after they had descended the Burial Mounds. Not one of them had expected him to be silently clinging to the fishing boat for who knows how long.

While Wen Ning had fought alongside them back at the Burial Mounds, there had been a lot of people and many elders around. But it was the middle of the night now, and they were by themselves on the water. Wen Ning's sudden and frankly bizarre appearance gave the boys a fright. Both parties stared at each other, stunned.

Ouyang Zizhen was the first to shrink back. “Why did the Ghost General come to us on his own?” he said, sitting on the deck.

“No wonder the boat was going so slow,” one of the boys grumbled. “It was because there’s extra deadweight weighing us down.”

“Why…is he clinging there?”

“Whatever the reason, it’s definitely not to hurt us. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have protected us during the day at the Burial Mounds.”

“But there’s no danger now, so why did he come find us again…?”

“Pfft!”

“What’re you laughing about, Jingyi?”

“Look at him,” Lan Jingyi said through his laughter. “He looks like a big sea turtle, the way he’s clinging to the side of the boat and not moving!”

Now that he mentioned it, some of them realized Wen Ning really did resemble a big sea turtle. They didn’t laugh, however.

“He’s coming up!” Ouyang Zizhen exclaimed.

Sure enough, Wen Ning had pulled himself out of the water and was slowly climbing up, using a thick rope that dangled from the deck. The boys scattered in an instant. A few of the more timid ones ran around the deck in panic, their feet stomping heavily on the boards as they screamed at random.

“He’s coming up, he’s coming up! The Ghost General is coming!”

“What’s there to be scared of?” Lan Jingyi asked. “It’s not like we’ve never seen him before!”

“What do we do? Should we call people over?!”

When a dripping Wen Ning flipped over the railing and landed heavily on the deck, the entire fishing boat seemed to rock. The boys were extremely nervous, wishing desperately they could shift to

the other side of the deck. Their hearts were pounding, but they were too abashed to raise a sword against him.

Wen Ning stared intently at Lan Sizhui's face, then started to walk toward him. Lan Sizhui, sensing he was here specifically for him, steadied himself.

"What…what is your name?" Wen Ning asked him.

Lan Sizhui was slightly taken aback, then stood tall. "I am a junior of the Lan Clan of Gusu. My name is Lan Yuan."

"Lan Yuan?" Wen Ning repeated.

Lan Sizhui nodded.

"Do…do you know, who…who gave you that name?" Wen Ning then asked.

The dead could not form facial expressions. Maybe it was only Lan Sizhui's imagination, but Wen Ning's eyes seemed to light up. He also thought Wen Ning looked excited—excited enough to be stumbling over his words. It was making *him* excited as well, as if a secret that had been sealed for years was about to be revealed.

"My name was, of course, given to me by my parents," Lan Sizhui answered carefully.

"Then are your parents still alive and well?" Wen Ning asked.

"My parents passed away when I was very young," Lan Sizhui replied.

One of the boys tugged on Lan Sizhui's sleeve and whispered, "Sizhui, don't say too much. Watch out for tricks."

Wen Ning blinked. "Sizhui? Sizhui is your courtesy name?"

"Yes," Lan Sizhui confirmed.

"Who gave it to you?" Wen Ning asked.

"Hanguang-jun," Lan Sizhui replied.

Wen Ning lowered his head and silently recited the name "Sizhui" to himself a few more times. Seeing some sort of

understanding dawn on him, Lan Sizhui asked about it.

"Gen…" He was about to call him General but felt it sounded strange and chose another address. "Mister Wen? Is there something about my name?"

"Ah," Wen Ning looked up and scrutinized his face. What he said next did not answer the question. "You, you look…a l-lot like one of my distant relatives…"

This sounded very much like the kind of excuse a low-level cultivator or a non-blood-related sect disciple would use to try and cozy up to the juniors of the main household. The group of boys were growing more and more mystified, not knowing what to make of this.

Lan Sizhui didn't know how to respond either, so he only replied, "R…really?"

"Yes!" Wen Ning confirmed enthusiastically.

He tried hard to lift the muscles at the corners of his lips, as if wanting to squeeze out a smile. For some reason, the way the "Ghost General" was acting seemed grievously familiar to Lan Sizhui. A vague thought surfaced in his mind—he had seen this face somewhere before. There was a form of address on the tip of his tongue. If he could only blurt it out, many other things would follow, and everything would become clear.

But at that moment, he saw Jin Ling.

Jin Ling's face was dark. He looked extremely upset. His grip on his sword tightened and slackened fitfully, just as the veins on the back of his hand came and went. Only then did Lan Sizhui remember that the Ghost General Wen Ning, who seemed so harmless, was the one who had murdered Jin Ling's father.

Following his gaze, Wen Ning's "smile" also gradually vanished. He slowly turned toward Jin Ling. "Jin Rulan-gongzi?"

"Who's that?" Jin Ling replied coldly.

Wen Ning fell silent for a moment, then changed his greeting. "Jin Ling-xiao-gongzi."

Jin Ling stared hard at him, while the other boys stared nervously at Jin Ling, afraid he was about to act rashly.

"Jin-gongzi…" Lan Sizhui started.

"Move. This has nothing to do with you," Jin Ling stated.

But Lan Sizhui could tell this might not be entirely *un*related to him. He stepped in front of Jin Ling and blocked his path.

"Jin Ling, put your sword away first…"

Jin Ling was already tense as a taut string. With his vision now obstructed, he snapped without thinking, "Don't block me!"

He shoved Lan Sizhui. Already queasy and unsteady on his feet, Lan Sizhui crashed into the railing and almost toppled into the river's pitch-black waters. Thankfully, Wen Ning pulled him back just in time. The boys immediately scrambled over to give Lan Sizhui a helping hand.

"Sizhui-xiong!"

"Lan-gongzi, are you all right? Are you still nauseated?"

Wen Ning grew distressed at the sight of Lan Sizhui's blanched face. "Jin-gongzi, please attack me instead. I, Wen Ning, will never fight back. But A-Yua…Lan Yuan-gongzi…"

Lan Jingyi was furious. "Jin Ling, why are you like this?!" he berated. "What did Sizhui do to you?!"

"Sizhui-xiong acted in your own best interests. It's fine if you don't appreciate that, but why push him?"

Jin Ling was also startled by the force of his own reaction, at first. But the sight of his peers rushing to help Lan Sizhui and turning to scold him was familiar, matching countless others in his memory. For many years, everyone said he was spoiled because he was an orphan with no one to discipline him, that he had a rotten temper and was difficult to get along with. He had no close friends his own

age, whether at Golden Carp Tower or Lotus Pier. The high status afforded to him by his birth only made his situation more awkward. When he was little, there were no juniors from the prominent clans who liked playing with him. Now that he was older, there were no juniors from the prominent clans who would follow him. The more he thought about it, the more his eyes reddened.

"That's right! It's all my fault!" he suddenly shouted. "I'm just that terrible of a person! What're you all gonna do about it?!"

The other boys were stunned by his outburst. They were speechless until someone grumbled indignantly.

"What? *You're* the one who pushed him… What're you getting mad at us for?"

"So what?!" Jin Ling spat. "You gonna discipline me?!"

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were riding in the closest boat. At the sound of all that yelling, Wei Wuxian paused and then rushed outside the cabin to look at the neighboring vessel.

He immediately spotted Jin Ling in a face-off with the others, and called over to them, "What's going on?"

The sight of the two of them always made Lan Sizhui feel like even the most difficult situation could be resolved. "Hanguang-jun! Wei-qianbei!" he shouted to them, overjoyed. "Come over, quick!"

Lan Wangji wrapped his arm around Wei Wuxian's waist and brought him onto Bichen. The pair rode the sword across to land on the other fishing boat. Wei Wuxian teetered a little, but Lan Wangji held him steady.

Once he was settled, Wei Wuxian asked, "Wen Ning, what's going on? Didn't you say you were just gonna take a gander?"

"I'm sorry, gongzi," Wen Ning said. "It's my fault. I couldn't hold back…"

Jin Ling pointed his sword at him. "Drop the act!" he roared furiously.

"Jin Ling," Wei Wuxian said, "put your sword down first."

"No! I won't!" Jin Ling said.

Wei Wuxian was about to say more, but Jin Ling unexpectedly burst into tears.

Everyone was stunned speechless. Wei Wuxian took a step toward him, bewildered.

"Uhm… What's wrong?"

Even as tears streamed down Jin Ling's face, his voice was loud and furious between sobs. "This is my dad's sword. *I'm not putting it down!*"

He hugged Jin Zixuan's sword, Suihua, tight to his chest. That sword was the one and only thing his parents had left him.

The sight of Jin Ling wailing aloud in front of an audience evoked something in Wei Wuxian's memory. It was almost as if he were looking at a heartbroken Jiang Yanli, weeping profusely. Some young men of Jin Ling's age were already married, while some who were only slightly older even had children. To them, crying was a humiliating act. One could only imagine how aggrieved Jin Ling was, to stand there crying for all to see.

Wei Wuxian was momentarily at a loss. He looked pleadingly at Lan Wangji, as if wanting to ask him for help, but Lan Wangji was even less likely to have an answer.

A voice suddenly rang out from across the river just then. "A-Ling!"

Five or six large boats surrounded their fishing vessel, each packed full of cultivators and with a clan leader standing on the bow. The Jiang Clan of Yunmeng's boat was the closest, directly to the right of the small fishing boat, with only sixteen meters between them. The voice they heard was Jiang Cheng's, and he stood at the ship's railing.

The moment he saw his uncle through his teary eyes, Jin Ling wiped his face haphazardly and sniffled. He looked this way and

that, then gritted his teeth before flying over on his sword and landing beside Jiang Cheng.

Jiang Cheng grabbed him. "What's going on?" he demanded. "Who bullied you?!"

Jin Ling rubbed his eyes hard, unwilling to speak. Jiang Cheng looked up, shooting a grim glance toward the fishing boat. His cold glare swept over Wen Ning and was just about to stop on Wei Wuxian when Lan Wangji stepped forward and—whether by accident or by design—very coincidentally blocked his line of sight.

One of the family heads warily spoke up. "Wei Wuxian, what are you doing on that boat?"

His tone was suspicious and unpleasant. Clearly, he thought Wei Wuxian harbored evil intentions.

"Sect Leader Yao," Ouyang Zizhen said. "Why must you speak like that? If Wei-qianbei wanted to do anything, no one on the boat would be sitting here safe and sound right now."

Many of the older cultivators felt a touch of embarrassment at his words. Although it was the truth, no one wanted to hear it being voiced so bluntly.

"Zizhen is right!" Lan Sizhui immediately chimed in.

Many of the boys also agreed in unison.

Jiang Cheng cocked his head and called out, "Sect Leader Ouyang."

Sect Leader Ouyang's eye twitched and his heart pounded at being named.

He heard Jiang Cheng say to him in a frosty tone, "If I remember correctly, the one speaking to us right now is your son. He certainly is eloquent."

"Zizhen!" Sect Leader Ouyang hurriedly called to his son. "Come back. Come over to Dad!"

Puzzled, Ouyang Zizhen said, “Dad, weren’t you the one who told me to stay on this boat and not bother you?”

Sect Leader Ouyang wiped away his sweat. “That’s enough! Haven’t you made enough of a splash today? Come here right now!”

His sect was based in Baling, which was close to Yunmeng. He couldn’t possibly compete with the Jiang Clan’s power and influence, and he had no desire to get in Jiang Cheng’s bad books just because his son kept speaking up for Wei Wuxian.

Jiang Cheng threw a glare at Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji before returning to the cabin with his arm around Jin Ling’s shoulders.

Sect Leader Ouyang breathed a sigh of relief and yelled at his son again. “You, you, you! You only grow more disobedient the older you get! Are you coming over or not? If not, I’m coming over to nab you myself!”

“Dad, you should go back inside the cabin and rest up too,” Ouyang Zizhen urged with concern. “Your spiritual power hasn’t recovered yet. I’m sure there’s no way you can come over. Don’t try to ride your sword so rashly, okay?”

The majority of the cultivators were still in the process of recovering their spiritual power. If they tried to force themselves to ride their swords, they might just plummet headfirst to the ground—which was, of course, why they’d had to travel by boat to begin with. Sect Leader Ouyang was also notably tall and burly, and given his weight, it really was impossible for him to fly over and nab his son. He was so infuriated by the boy that he stormed off to the cabin in a whirl of sleeves.

From another boat, Nie Huaisang laughed out loud. The other clan leaders looked at him, speechless, but those who should be dispersing began to do so. On seeing this, Wei Wuxian heaved a long sigh of relief. A look of extreme weariness suddenly spread across his face, and he tilted to one side.

Apparently, his unsteadiness earlier wasn't because he'd been off-balance on the fishing boat but because he was simply too exhausted to remain on his feet.

Unbothered by the blood and filth he was covered in, the boys scrambled over to help support him as they had just done with Lan Sizhui. But there was no need for them to do so. Bending slightly at the waist, Lan Wangji placed an arm around Wei Wuxian's shoulders, another under his legs, and picked him up in one swoop.

He carried Wei Wuxian into the cabin like that. There were only four long wooden benches inside, and no place to lie down. Lan Wangji wrapped an arm around Wei Wuxian's waist and let his head rest on his shoulder. With his other hand, he pushed and pulled the four benches together to make a surface wide enough to lie on, then gently settled Wei Wuxian there.

Lan Sizhui suddenly noticed that even though Hanguang-jun was drenched in blood, the bandage Wei Wuxian had torn from his own sleeve to dress a small wound on the fingers of his left hand was still securely knotted in place.

Thus far, Lan Wangji had been too preoccupied to bother with appearances. Only now did he take out his handkerchief and use it to slowly wipe the coagulated blood from Wei Wuxian's face. It didn't take long for the snow-white handkerchief to be stained shades of black and red, and despite having cleaned Wei Wuxian's face, he had yet to wipe his own.

Lan Sizhui hurriedly presented his own handkerchief. "Hanguang-jun."

Lan Wangji took it and lowered his head. One swipe of the handkerchief left a field of snowy white in its wake. The boys were then able to breathe a sigh of relief. It was true—Hanguang-jun only looked normal with a face of ice and snow.

"Hanguang-jun," Ouyang Zizhen asked, "why did Wei-qianbei collapse?"

"He is tired," Lan Wangji answered.

Lan Jingyi was astonished. “I thought Wei-qianbei could never tire!”

The other boys were similarly shocked, finding it inconceivable that the legendary Yiling Patriarch could collapse from exhaustion after dealing with walking corpses. They’d all thought the Yiling Patriarch could settle everything with a mere snap of his fingers.

Lan Wangji, however, shook his head. “We are all human,” he stated simply.

They were all human. What human would not tire, and what human would never collapse?

Lan Wangji had pushed all the long benches together, so the boys could only crouch in a circle and look on helplessly. If Wei Wuxian had been awake, the cabin would have been alive with his wisecracking and his glib tongue teasing everyone in turn. But no, he just had to be down for the count. Which left only Hanguang-jun, who sat straight as a brush beside him. Normally, someone would start chatting to liven up the atmosphere, but no one dared say a word when Lan Wangji wasn’t speaking. Even after they’d been squatting there a long time, dead silence still prevailed inside the cabin.

The boys grumbled to themselves. How boring.

They were so bored that they started communicating with their eyes.

Why isn’t Hanguang-jun saying anything? Why has Wei-qianbei still not woken up?

Cupping his cheeks with both hands, Ouyang Zizhen pointed here and there to express himself. Is Hanguang-jun always this silent? How can Wei-qianbei stand being around him all day…?

Lan Sizhui gave a grave nod of his head in soundless confirmation. Hanguang-jun certainly has always been this way!

Suddenly, Wei Wuxian frowned and tilted his head. Lan Wangji gently moved his head back in place, lest he sprain his neck.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian mumbled.

Everyone was overjoyed, thinking he was about to wake up, but Wei Wuxian's eyes remained tightly shut.

Lan Wangji, on the other hand, looked as he usually did. "Mn. I am here."

Wei Wuxian said nothing else. He nuzzled against Lan Wangji, as if feeling safe and reassured, and continued to sleep.

The boys stared blankly at the two of them. Then, for some reason, they suddenly blushed. Lan Sizhui was the first to stand up.

"Han…Hanguang-jun, we will go outside for a bit…" he stammered.

They practically fled out onto the deck. Only when the night breeze blew against them did that awful, suffocating feeling dissipate.

"What the heck?!" someone said. "Why did we have to rush out?! Why?!"

Ouyang Zizhen covered his face. "I dunno why either, but I suddenly got the feeling it was really inappropriate to stick around in there!"

They pointed at each other and cried accusations.

"What are you blushing for?!"

"I'm blushing because *you're* blushing!"

Wen Ning hadn't gone over to help support Wei Wuxian in the first place, nor followed them into the cabin. Instead, he crouched on the deck outside. The boys had found this strange at first, wondering why he didn't go in. It was only now that they realized just how wise the Ghost General truly was.

There was absolutely no room for anyone else in there!

Wen Ning seemed to have expected them to come out, because he made room for them to crouch with him. However, only

Lan Sizhui walked over and did so. The other boys muttered among themselves on the other side of the deck.

"Why does Sizhui seem to be on familiar terms with the Ghost General?"

"Lan-gongzi, can I call you A-Yuan?" Wen Ning asked.

The boys were inwardly horrified. *…To think the Ghost General is so forward!*

However, Lan Sizhui answered him with delight, "Sure!"

"A-Yuan, have you been doing well all these years?" Wen Ning asked.

"Very well," Lan Sizhui answered.

Wen Ning nodded. "Hanguang-jun must have treated you very well."

Hearing the respect in his tone when he mentioned Lan Wangji made Lan Sizhui feel even closer to him. "Hanguang-jun treats me as a brother and a father would. He was the one who taught me to play the guqin."

"When did Hanguang-jun start raising you?" Wen Ning asked.

Lan Sizhui pondered for a moment, then answered, "I don't remember. Probably when I was four or five years old. I don't have many memories of my childhood, but Hanguang-jun probably couldn't have been the one taking care of me when I was younger than that. He seemed to have been in seclusion for many years at the time."

It suddenly occurred to him that the first Siege of the Burial Mounds had taken place at the same time as Hanguang-jun's seclusion.

Inside the cabin, Lan Wangji glanced at the door the juniors had closed when they rushed out, then looked down again at Wei Wuxian, whose head was tilting to the side once more. His eyebrows were knitted, and he seemed very uncomfortable, tossing and

turning his head. Seeing this, Lan Wangji stood up and walked to the door to bolt it before returning to sit beside Wei Wuxian. He pulled Wei Wuxian upright by the shoulders and let him gently rest in his embrace.

With this change of position, Wei Wuxian's head finally stopped flopping back and forth. He burrowed into Lan Wangji's chest and eventually found a comfortable position to sleep in.

Seeing him settle down, Lan Wangji lowered his head to gaze at the face of the man in his arms. His long, black hair cascaded down. All of a sudden, eyes still closed, Wei Wuxian grabbed Lan Wangji's collar. His fingers just so happened to catch hold of the tail of his forehead ribbon.

He gripped the ribbon tight. Lan Wangji tugged at the ribbon tail. Not only did he fail to pull it from Wei Wuxian's grip, but his efforts made Wei Wuxian's eyelashes quiver.

Not a moment later, Wei Wuxian woke up.

When he slowly opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was the wooden ceiling of the cabin. He sat up. Lan Wangji stood by a wooden window in the cabin, gazing out into the distance at the luminous moon at the river's end.

"Hmm? Hanguang-jun, did I pass out earlier?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Lan Wangji turned his head and answered calmly, "Yes."

Wei Wuxian followed this with another question. "Where's your forehead ribbon?"

"…"

Done with his questions, Wei Wuxian looked down and made a noise of surprise. "Oops, how'd that happen? It's right here in my hands!"

He swung his legs off the long benches. "So sorry about that. I like hugging something while I sleep. If I don't have anything to hug, I tend to grab things at random. My bad, 'kay? Here you go."

Lan Wangji stayed silent a moment longer, then took the forehead ribbon he handed him. "It is fine."

Wei Wuxian, however, was trying so hard to suppress his laughter that he was about to suffer an internal injury. There had certainly been a moment, earlier, when he'd really wanted to sleep—but he wasn't quite so frail that he would faint at the drop of a hat. But who knew? He'd just teetered a little, and Lan Wangji had swept him up with incomparable haste. It made Wei Wuxian too embarrassed to say, *Hey, don't worry about it. I can stand on my own*. And honestly, he didn't *want* to be set back down—why stand when you can be carried?

Wei Wuxian rubbed his neck, feeling secretly delighted and smug even as he lamented to himself. *Ahh, Lan Zhan is honestly… Had I known this would happen, I wouldn't have woken up. I could have lain in his arms the entire journey if I was still out cold.*

They arrived in Yunmeng just before dawn.

Lotus Pier's main gates and dock were so brightly illuminated that their reflection in the waters gleamed with golden light. The dock had rarely seen so many boats of so many sizes gathered around all at once. Not only were the guards before the gates stunned at the sight, but even the old men still selling midnight snacks at the riverside stalls were dumbstruck.

Jiang Cheng was the first to disembark. He gave a few orders to the guards, and countless fully geared disciples immediately poured out of the main gates. The crowd disembarked in batches, and the guest cultivators from the Jiang Sect arranged for them to enter. Sect Leader Ouyang finally nabbed his son and dragged him away, lecturing him under his breath. Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji walked out of the cabin and hopped off the fishing boat.

"Gongzi," Wen Ning called out. "I'll wait for you outside."

Wei Wuxian nodded, knowing that Wen Ning would not step through the main gates of Lotus Pier, and Jiang Cheng would never allow it regardless.

"Mister Wen, I'll keep you company," Lan Sizhui said.

"You will?" Wen Ning exclaimed in delight. He hadn't expected that at all.

With a smile, Lan Sizhui said, "Yeah. In any case, the seniors are going to discuss important matters, so it's pointless for me to head inside. Let's continue our conversation. Where were we just now? Did Wei-qianbei really plant a two-year-old child in the soil like he would a radish…?"

Although his voice was quiet, the two in front had extremely keen hearing. Wei Wuxian stumbled in his step. Lan Wangji quirked his eyebrows for a moment, but he recovered in no time.

After their backs disappeared through the main gates of Lotus Pier, Lan Sizhui continued in a hushed tone. "That poor child. But actually, I remember Hanguang-jun once set me down in the middle of a bunch of rabbits when I was little. The two of them are really quite similar in some respects…"

Before they entered the main gates of Lotus Pier, Wei Wuxian took a deep breath to calm himself. But once he strode through, he found he wasn't as worked up as he expected to be.

Perhaps it was because too much had been renovated. The drilling ground had been expanded to twice its size, and the upturned eaves and corners of dozens of new buildings peeked out from behind each other at varying heights. It was much more imposing and glorious than before. But…it was almost unrecognizable compared to the Lotus Pier of his memory.

Wei Wuxian felt a sense of loss. He didn't know whether the old buildings were obstructed from view by the resplendent new ones or if they had been demolished by now.

After all, they really were very old.

The various sects' disciples formed into square formations again on the drilling ground. They settled into the lotus meditation pose to continue to recuperate and recover their spiritual powers.

After nearly a full day and night of torment, they were utterly exhausted and needed to catch their breath.

Jiang Cheng led the leaders and important cultivators into the main hall of the household, Sword Hall, to discuss the day's events. Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji followed them inside. Some found this slightly inappropriate, but there was nothing they could say about it.

They had only just entered and had yet to take their seats when someone who looked like a guest cultivator hurried over to Jiang Cheng.

"Sect Leader."

He moved in close and whispered a few words into Jiang Cheng's ear. Jiang Cheng frowned.

"No, I will not meet them. If they have matters to discuss, it can wait for another day. Can't you read the room right now?"

"That's what I told them," the guest cultivator replied, "but the two ladies said…today's matter is precisely why they have come."

"What's their background? Which sect do they belong to?" Jiang Cheng questioned.

"They're not from any sect, and they aren't cultivators either," the guest cultivator answered. "I'm certain they are both ordinary women, without spiritual power. They only just arrived today. They brought a batch of rare and expensive medicinal herbs with them, but didn't specify which clan leader sent them. All they said was that they had something to tell you. It didn't sound like a trivial matter, the way they said it. I didn't want them to feel slighted, so I put them up at the guest house. The medicinal herbs have not gone into storage yet; I have inspected them for inappropriate spells and found nothing."

The head of the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng didn't meet with just anyone, especially when they were unwilling to reveal who they were. Even less so two ordinary women with no spiritual powers and no background to speak of. But since they had brought with them a

batch of rare, expensive medicinal herbs, the guest cultivator responsible for receiving them did not dare slight them. Even without the generous gifts, the oddness of the encounter would have been enough to make him take them seriously.

"Ladies and gentlemen." Jiang Cheng called for the room's attention. "Please make yourselves at home. Allow me to excuse myself for a moment. I will be right back."

The crowd responded one after another. "Of course, Sect Leader Jiang."

However, Jiang Cheng did not come right back. In fact, he did not return for a long time. Leaving guests unattended was already a breach of etiquette, all the more so in these extraordinary circumstances, where everyone was waiting to discuss important affairs. When Jiang Cheng had still not appeared almost an hour later, many of the guests started to feel uneasy or displeased.

It was then that Jiang Cheng finally returned. He had left with a neutral expression, but his face was now cold and serious. He walked swiftly and brought two people with him. They were two women—presumably the same pair that had come calling on him.

At first, everyone assumed there had to be something special about these women for them to be able to come bearing such generous gifts. Unexpectedly, neither of them was young, their advanced age evident in the deep creases at the corners of their eyes and mouths. One looked meek and apprehensive, while the other was notable not just because she looked like a strumpet but because of the five or six large, scarred slash marks across her face. The scars were old, but they looked so horrifying that the cultivators were utterly repulsed and disappointed. They began grumbling to themselves, wondering why Jiang Cheng had brought these two women to Sword Hall, even directing them to the center of the room.

With a somber expression, Jiang Cheng spoke to the two women, who were taking their seats in trepidation. "Tell us about it

right here."

"Sect Leader Jiang, what do you mean by this?" Sect Leader Yao asked.

"What I just learned from them is too appalling to describe. I did not dare act carelessly, so I questioned them at length. That is why I was delayed. Everyone, please quiet down and listen to these two." Jiang Cheng turned around and asked, "Which of you will start?"

The two women looked at each other. The woman with the weathered air of a lady of the night was more daring, so she stood up.

"I'll go first, then!" She casually curtsied to the crowd. "What I'm about to tell you is an incident that happened roughly eleven years ago."

Jiang Cheng's tone told everyone that what the woman was about to say was significant. They wondered to themselves what could have happened eleven years ago.

"My name is Sisi," the woman began. "I used to be a working girl, and I guess I was pretty popular for a while. Over a decade ago, there was this wealthy merchant I wanted to marry, but his wife turned out to be a real scary one. She hired a gang of burly brutes to cut up my face, and that's how I got like this."

The woman spoke without shame and didn't mince her words. As she went on, some female cultivators covered their mouths with their sleeves and some male cultivators frowned.

"With my face like this, life was no longer the same," Sisi continued. "No one was willing to spare me a glance, let alone hire me to do my business. My original brothel threw me out. I have no other skills and couldn't find customers anywhere, so I partnered up with some older sisters in the same line of work. Their customers didn't demand much, and if they got any jobs, they would bring me along with them. As long as I covered up my face, I could make it work."

At this point, some of the cultivators couldn't take it anymore. The naked contempt in their eyes blazed forth, stark and undisguised for all to see. Some didn't understand why Jiang Cheng wanted the crowd to hear this woman speak publicly of her salacious past. The clan leaders, however, kept their cool and waited for her to continue.

Sure enough, Sisi arrived at the point.

"One day, my sisters who worked out of the same alley as me suddenly received a job. They hired over twenty of us and took us to the location in a horse carriage. After discussing the pay, my older sisters were thrilled to bits as they sat in that carriage, but I felt something wasn't right. To put it bluntly, everyone there was either old and faded, like a yellowing pearl, or scarred like me. But we were paid so much money—and paid in advance, to boot. Wasn't it too good to be true? What's more, the person who sought us out was awful secretive and sneaky. He pulled up, loaded everyone right into the carriage, and whisked us away without letting anyone else see. No matter how you looked at it, he didn't seem like he meant well!"

The others in the room thought so as well. Their initial contempt had been replaced with curiosity.

"When the carriage arrived at the destination, it drove directly into a courtyard and let us off there," Sisi continued. "None of us had ever seen such a tall, glorious house. We were so dazzled by the sight that we didn't even dare breathe. There was a boy leaning against the doorway, fiddling with a dagger. When he saw us, he told us to enter before closing the door behind us.

"We went inside. In that huge house, there were only two people. There was a man lying under a brocade quilt on the bed. He was about thirty or forty years old and looked so sick that he was basically half dead. When he noticed us enter, he could only move his eyes."

"Oh!" Someone in Sword Hall suddenly exclaimed in shock as realization dawned. "Eleven years ago?! That's… That's…!"

"Someone had instructed us beforehand about what we should do. Every single one of us was to pleasure the man on the bed to the fullest extent of our skills, without even a moment's pause," Sisi continued. "I'd been expecting some kind of extraordinarily manly guy—not an invalid. Would he even survive us? He'd probably drop dead two rounds in. How could someone be such a sex maniac? Besides, they were rich. It's not like they couldn't afford young and pretty girls, so why did they insist on hiring old and ugly ones like us?

"I was still trying to figure it out when I climbed on top of him. Suddenly, I heard another man laugh. It made me jump. It was only then I realized there was a curtain beside the bed—and a person sitting behind it!"

Everyone's heart was in their throats.

"I realized he'd been sitting behind the curtain all along," Sisi continued. "The moment he laughed, the man on the bed began to struggle. He threw me off him and rolled off the bed, and that person only laughed harder. As he laughed, he said, *'Father, I've brought you the women you love so much. There are so many of them! Aren't you happy?'*"

Everyone felt their hair stand on end. Although those words had been spoken by Sisi, their minds could clearly picture them coming from another's ever-smiling mouth.

Jin Guangyao!

And the half-dead man on the bed must have been Jin Guangshan!

Jin Guangshan's death had always been an open secret among the clans. The man had been a philanderer his whole life, to the extent it was almost obscene. He left a trail of lovers and offspring in his wake across the land, and even the cause of his death was related to this hobby. Despite being the head of the Jin Clan of

Lanling, he insisted on making merry with women even as his health deteriorated. Eventually, he died in the middle of intercourse, which was too undignified a death to announce to the public.

After suffering the painful loss of her only son and daughter-in-law, Madam Jin had already been depressed for several years. And then she learned that her husband had not only *not* stopped fooling around but even thrown his life away in the process. This infuriated her so much that she fell ill and passed away not long after.

The Jin Clan of Lanling attempted to cover up what happened, but everyone knew the truth. On the surface, they sighed with grief and regret, but in reality, they all thought that it served him right. He deserved to die in such a way.

Who could have dreamed they'd hear an even uglier and more revolting truth today? Sharp intakes of breath rose and fell one after another in Sword Hall.

"The middle-aged man wanted to shout and struggle, but he had no strength left in him," Sisi carried on. "The boy who had led us inside opened the door again and entered the room. He dragged the man back onto the bed, laughing cheekily all the while. Then he trussed him up, tied him down, and braced his foot against his head as he tightened the rope. He told us to continue, to not stop even if he died. None of us had ever seen anything like it. We were scared to death, but we didn't dare disobey, so we kept going. By the eleventh or twelfth round, the sister attending to him suddenly screamed that he was dead. I went up to take a look. He really wasn't breathing. But the man behind the curtain said, *'Didn't you hear your orders? Don't stop, even if he dies!'*"

Sect Leader Ouyang couldn't help but say, "No matter what, Jin Guangshan was his father by blood. If this is true… It's really too… Too…"

"When I saw he was dead, I knew it was over," Sisi said. "We wouldn't be escaping that house either. And just as I suspected,

every single one of my twenty or so sisters was killed once the night was done. No one else was spared…"

"Why did they spare you and only you?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"I don't know!" Sisi answered. "I pleaded and begged for my life, told them I didn't want the money anymore and I'd never say a word about this. I never thought they actually *would* spare me. They took me to a house and locked me up for eleven years. It's only recently that I was saved by a stroke of luck and got outta there."

"Who saved you?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"I don't know," Sisi replied. "I never met the person who saved me face-to-face. But after my savior heard my story, they decided they didn't want to allow that immoral hypocrite to keep lying to the world. Even if that man has hoodwinked the masses, my savior is determined to expose his deeds and bring justice to his victims. Those twenty or so poor sisters of mine may yet be able to rest in peace."

"Do you have any evidence to back up what you've said?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Sisi hesitated for a moment, then said, "No. But if I told a single lie, let my corpse rot without even a mat to wrap it in!"

Sect Leader Yao immediately piped up. "She spoke in such clear detail. She's definitely not lying!"

Lan Qiren's brow was locked in a tight furrow. He turned to the other woman. "I seem to have met you before."

With a panic-stricken look, the woman said, "Most…most likely."

Everyone was taken aback. Sisi was a street prostitute, so could this woman be one as well? How could Lan Qiren have met her before?

"I often accompanied my madam when the Qin Clan of Laoling hosted symposiums," the woman said.

"The Qin Clan of Laoling?" a female cultivator asked. "You're a maid from the Qin Clan of Laoling?"

A more sharp-eyed female cultivator addressed her directly by name. "You're…Bicao! Madam Qin's handmaid, Bicao! Right?"

The Madam Qin she spoke of was Qin Cangye's wife, and also the mother of Qin Su, Jin Guangyao's wife.

Bicao nodded. "But I'm no longer with the Qin Clan."

Greatly excited, Sect Leader Yao slapped the table and stood up. "You have something to tell us too, right?"

With reddened eyes, Bicao said, "The tale I've come here to tell took place a little earlier than the previous one, about twelve or thirteen years ago.

"I served my madam for many years, and I watched my young miss grow up. Madam always cared deeply for Miss Su but was in a bad mood in the days leading up to Miss Su's marriage. She had nightmares every night and would spontaneously weep during the day. I thought it was because her daughter was about to be married and she couldn't bear to part with her, so I kept comforting her, telling her that Miss Su's future husband, Lianfang-zun Jin Guangyao, was a promising young man. He was gentle, considerate, and devoted. She would have a blessed life. But surprisingly, Madam only looked more upset at my words.

"When the wedding day neared, Madam suddenly told me one night that she was going to see Miss Su's future husband, and she was going immediately. She wanted me to accompany her in secret. I told her, *'Why not summon him here instead? Why sneak out in the middle of the night to meet a young man? Imagine the horrible rumors if anyone were to find out!'* But Madam was determined, so I had no choice but to go with her. When we arrived, Madam told me to keep watch outside and not go in. I didn't hear anything, and I don't know what exactly she said to Jin Guangyao. All I know is that a few days later, Miss Su's wedding day was set, and Madam fainted the moment she saw the invitation. Even after the wedding, Madam

remained in low spirits. Her distress made her fall ill, and her condition worsened. Right before she passed away, she couldn't take it anymore. She told me everything."

Bicao wept as she continued.

"Lianfang-zun Jin Guangyao and our Miss Su…how are they husband and wife? They are brother and sister…"

"What?!"

Even if heavenly thunder had struck Sword Hall at that moment, it would not have been as shockingly impactful as that single statement.

Qin Su's pale face surfaced in Wei Wuxian's mind.

"Oh, my poor madam…" Bicao lamented. "Old Sect Leader Jin was an animal. He lusted after my madam's beauty and forced himself on her one night when he was drunk… How could Madam have been capable of fighting off his advances? She didn't dare speak out after the fact either. She was too terrified to even try, since the master of the house was loyal to that man. Jin Guangshan didn't remember whose daughter Miss Su was, but my madam could never forget. She didn't dare go to Jin Guangshan, but knowing that Miss Su was in love with Jin Guangyao, she was conflicted for a very long time before she finally went to him in secret before the wedding day. She revealed some of the truth to him and begged him to think of some way to cancel the wedding, telling him they mustn't commit such a grave mistake. Who would have thought…that Jin Guangyao would still marry Miss Su, despite knowing she was his younger halfsister!"

Even more frightening—he hadn't just married her but also had a child with her!

What an earth-shattering scandal!

Voices rose in wave after wave of discussion, each surging louder than the last.

"How many years had Old Sect Leader Qin served Jin Guangshan? To think he'd even lay a hand on the wife of a long-time subordinate. That Jin Guangshan…!"

"In the end, there is no secret in the world that can be kept forever…"

"If Jin Guangyao wanted to gain a firm foothold in the Jin Clan of Lanling, he *had* to have a solid father-in-law like Qin Cangye to give him a boost. How could he *not* marry her?"

"He's a maniac without equal in all the world!"

"No wonder he told Qin Su that A-Song had to die, back when they were in the secret chamber," Wei Wuxian whispered to Lan Wangji.

A few others in Sword Hall also thought of A-Song.

"Knowing this, I would wager his son was not actually assassinated by any outside party…and that he did the deed with his *own* hands," Sect Leader Yao said.

"How so?"

"In all likelihood, a child born to close siblings will be dull-witted," Sect Leader Yao analyzed. "Jin Rusong died when he was a few years old—coincidentally, right around the time when a child would start their schooling. While no one would notice anything amiss when he was extremely young, the ways in which he was *different* from ordinary people would be exposed as he grew older. Though no one would immediately suspect blood ties between the parents, Jin Guangyao siring a feebleminded child would inevitably cause others to gossip and criticize, to say the child only turned out that way because he has the filthy blood of a prostitute running in his veins…"

The crowd felt this made great sense.

"Sect Leader Yao is so sharp!"

Sect Leader Yao added, "Besides, the one who poisoned Jin Rusong just so happened to be a family head who opposed Jin

Guangyao's construction of the observation towers. Can there be such a coincidence?" He sneered. "In any case, he had no need for a son who was very possibly an idiot. Kill Jin Rusong, frame that family head for it, and openly crusade against the clan who refused to yield to him in the name of avenging his son—although it was cold-blooded, he killed two birds with one stone. What a truly devious ploy, Lianfang-zun!"

Wei Wuxian turned to Bicao. "On the night of the recent symposium at Golden Carp Tower, did you meet with Qin Su?"

Bicao was taken aback. Wei Wuxian continued to probe.

"That night in Fragrance Palace, Qin Su and Jin Guangyao had an argument. She said she'd met with someone who told her some things and given her a letter—and also that this someone would never lie to her. Was it you?"

"It was me," Bicao confirmed.

"You guarded this secret for so many years," Wei Wuxian said. "Why did you decide to tell her so suddenly? And why the equally sudden decision to reveal it to us?"

"Because…" Bicao began. "I had to let Miss Su know what kind of person her husband is. And I didn't want to make it public at first, but then Miss Su inexplicably committed suicide at Golden Carp Tower. I must expose this beast in human clothing and get justice—for my madam as well as my young miss, whom I watched grow up."

Wei Wuxian smiled. "But did you never consider the blow you would deal her by revealing the truth to her? Or are you really that clueless? Qin Su committed suicide specifically because you told her about this."

"I…" Bicao started.

"I don't agree with you," Sect Leader Yao said with displeasure. "Are you saying hiding the truth is the right thing to do?"

Someone immediately spoke up in agreement. "You can't throw blame around like that. *Sigh*, Madam Jin… Qin Su was simply

too fragile."

"Poor Qin Su," several older female cultivators agreed.

"I even envied her once. What blessed fortune, I thought. Born into a good family, married a good man…the one and only mistress of Golden Carp Tower, with a husband who was wholeheartedly devoted to her. Who knew that… *Tsk, tsk*."

"Things that seem beautiful on the surface are always riddled with flaws beneath. There's nothing to envy at all," the wife of one of the cultivators present commented in an aloof manner.

Qin Su probably chose to kill herself because she couldn't endure this kind of gossip, Wei Wuxian thought to himself. *It sounds like sympathy on the surface, but really, it's just gloating.*

He looked down, suddenly noticing a bracelet of jade and gold on Bicao's wrist. It was of excellent quality, certainly not something a handmaid could afford.

"Nice bracelet you've got there," he said with a smile.

Bicao hurriedly pulled down her sleeves and lowered her head, saying nothing.

"But…" Nie Huaisang said blankly, "who exactly…sent these two here?"

"Why dwell on this?!" Sect Leader Yao said. "No matter who he is, we can be sure of one thing—he is a righteous man who is definitely on our side."

Cheers of agreement instantly rang out. "That's right!"

But Wei Wuxian said, "Miss Sisi's savior is certainly no ordinary man. He's rich and has a lot of free time on his hands. But righteous? Who knows."

"Many of the details are dubious," Lan Wangji said.

If Wei Wuxian had been the one to utter those words, not many people would have paid him much mind. But since the speaker was Lan Wangji, the crowd immediately quieted down.

"Dubious in what way?" Lan Qiren asked.

"Too many ways," Wei Wuxian replied. "For instance, Jin Guangyao is vicious and ruthless, so why did he kill twenty people but spare Sisi? We have a witness, but where is the material evidence?"

He kept voicing dissenting opinions, which set him at odds with the mounting public indignation. Some people present were already showing signs of displeasure.

"The net of Heaven is vast, but it lets nothing through!" Sect Leader Yao declared in a booming voice.

Wei Wuxian smiled at this and said no more.

He was aware no one would listen to what he had to say right now, and no one would carefully consider his doubts. If he said any more, they'd probably start targeting him again. Had he been the person he was a decade ago, he would have simply ignored them and said his piece anyway, forcing them to listen whether they wanted to or not. But Wei Wuxian no longer had any interest in stealing the limelight.

Wave after wave of condemnation crashed over the room, each higher and louder than the last.

"I can't believe this man is so ungrateful. That maniac!"

The words "ungrateful" and "maniac" had been almost synonymous with Wei Wuxian's name for more than a decade, so when he heard them uttered, he thought at first that they were cursing him again. It was a while before he realized they weren't. The people doing the cursing were the same, as was the vocabulary they used. But the subject of their abuse was different, and he was unaccustomed to the change in targets.

Following right after, someone said, "In the past, Jin Guangyao climbed to the top, one step at a time, only by ingratiating himself with Chifeng-zun and Zewu-jun. How else could the son of a prostitute sit in his seat today? To think he would murder Chifeng-

zun so viciously! And Zewu-jun is in his clutches right now—I just hope nothing bad happens to him!”

At first, none of them had believed Nie Mingjue’s death and dismemberment had anything to do with Jin Guangyao. Nor had they believed his involvement with the corpses sieging the Burial Mounds. But now, they suddenly did.

“It wasn’t just his sworn brothers—his blood brothers got it even worse. He spent the last few years before Jin Guangshan’s death busily clearing the land of his father’s illegitimate sons, for fear that someone would suddenly pop out of nowhere and challenge him for the position. Mo Xuanyu was probably one of the lucky ones. Had he not gone crazy and been booted back home, he would likely have ended up disappearing like the others.”

“He must have had something to do with Jin Zixuan’s death too!”

“Anyone here still remember Xiao Xingchen? Bright moon, cool breeze, ever-distant Xiao Xingchen. And the case of the Chang Clan of Yueyang? Lianfang-zun was the one who did all he could to preserve the life of the culprit, Xue Yang.”

“Didn’t many clans invite Xiao Xingchen-daozhang to be their guest cultivator when he first descended from the mountain? The Jin Clan of Lanling certainly did, but he politely turned them down. They were rather full of themselves at the time, though, weren’t they? Being rejected by a minor Daoist cultivator was a loss of face. That old grudge must have been one of the reasons the Jin Clan of Lanling later protected Xue Yang. At any rate, they just wanted to see Xiao Xingchen’s story come to a tragic end, ha.”

“Bah! Who do they think they are? Making you pay if you don’t join them!”

“Alas, what a pity. I had the privilege of witnessing Xiao Xingchen-daozhang in his full glory during a Night Hunt. Shuanghua was a sword that shook the world.”

"Jin Guangyao later got rid of Xue Yang. What a perfect example of dog biting dog."

"I heard Jin Guangyao didn't go undercover in the Wen Clan of Qishan with honest intentions. He planned to stay with the Wen Clan if the Sunshot Campaign did not go well, being Wen Ruohan's toady and helping him do his evil deeds. But if the Wens fell from power, he would double-cross them and play the hero."

"Wen Ruohan's probably rolling in his grave. He considered Jin Guangyao his trusted aide and trained him as such. Most of Jin Guangyao's sword techniques were taught to him by Wen Ruohan!"

"That's nothing. I heard Chifeng-zun's surprise attack on the Wens failed because he deliberately provided fake intel!"

"I'll share a secret too. Wasn't the money and material for the construction of his observation towers fleeced from various families? All the clans contributed manpower as well. I heard he always secretly kept…about *this* much for himself."

"Oh, good lord… That much? How utterly shameless. Here I thought he genuinely wanted to accomplish something. All our good faith's gone to the dogs!"

Wei Wuxian found this all a bit hilarious. *If they're just rumors, why so quick to believe them? If they're secrets, how would you even know of them?*

This was not the first time these rumors had spread. While Jin Guangyao was in power, they had been suppressed so well that no one took them seriously. But tonight, the rumors all seemed to have become hard facts with irrefutable evidence. They became a solid foundation for Jin Guangyao's multitude of crimes, proving just how unscrupulous he was.

"So it seems that this Jin guy killed his father, his brothers, his wife, his son, his master, his friends…and even committed incest. How terrifying!"

"The Jin Clan of Lanling is arrogant and overbearing, and Jin Guangyao is even worse in his dictatorial ways. He never listens to what others have to say, and now he's ushered in this awful trend of decadence and rank-pulling. Does he really think we'll tolerate this outrage forever?!"

"He probably felt threatened by the other clans' continued growth and expansion of power over the years. He feared he would be deposed, just like the Wen Clan of Qishan was in the past. And that's why he decided to go all the way and wipe us out in one fell swoop, right?"

Sect Leader Yao sneered. "In that case, we'll make his worst fears come true." He smacked the table. "We'll attack Golden Carp Tower!"

Amid the roaring cheers in the hall, Wei Wuxian thought, *Before today, this terrifying figure was still the Lianfang-zun whom everyone unanimously praised. Now in the course of just one day, everyone's baying for his blood.*

Suddenly, someone standing at the side of the room turned around. "Mister Wei, Jin Guangyao has the Yin Tiger Tally in his clutches. We're counting on you to deal with this."

"Huh?" Wei Wuxian blurted.

He hadn't expected anyone to take the initiative to talk to him, let alone so enthusiastically. What was more, they had even used "mister," rather than disparaging names like "traitor Wei," "Wei dog," or the like. He was a little stunned.

Another clan leader chimed in as well. "That's right! No one can rival the Yiling Patriarch in this area!"

"Jin Guangyao bit off more than he can chew with this, ha ha ha ha…"

For a moment, Wei Wuxian was left speechless. The last time the masses had heaped praise on him and fawned over him like this had been during the Sunshot Campaign over a decade ago. Even

though he'd managed to hang in there until someone else finally replaced him as public enemy number one, Wei Wuxian did not feel moved by the world finally accepting him. Even after all the bitterness he'd suffered, this did not taste sweet.

He couldn't help but wonder, deep down, *Was it like this too, back then? A bunch of them gathering somewhere to have a secret meeting, working themselves into a frenzy, then ultimately deciding to besiege the Burial Mounds?*

By the time the meeting ended, the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng's banquet hall was prepared to receive them too. But when the feast began, there were two figures missing.

One of the clan leaders wondered, "Why are Wei…the Yiling Patriarch and Hanguang-jun missing?"

Jiang Cheng, sitting in the head seat, asked the guest cultivator beside him, "Where are they?"

"After leaving the inner hall, the two gentlemen went to change clothes and stated they won't be joining the feast," the guest cultivator replied. "Instead, they are going for a walk and will return later."

Jiang Cheng snorted. "Still the same old, same old. No manners."

His criticism seemed to include Lan Wangji, which made Lan Qiren appear displeased. If Lan Wangji was accused of having no manners, there was no such thing as manners in the world. At this thought, he gritted his teeth at Wei Wuxian once more.

Jiang Cheng schooled his expression and addressed the room politely, "Please begin your meal, everyone. I will invite them back later."

— Part 3 —

OUTSIDE LOTUS PIER, Lan Wangji let Wei Wuxian lead him on a leisurely stroll around the docks without even asking where they were going.

There were several small food stalls at the docks. Wei Wuxian walked over to take a look and said with a smile, "It was the right decision to not eat with the rest of them. Lan Zhan, come, come, come. These pancakes are delicious. I'll treat you! Can I have two, please?"

The stall owner was all smiles as he wrapped up two pieces in greaseproof paper. Wei Wuxian was about to take them when he suddenly remembered he had no money on him—how was he going to treat Lan Zhan? However, Lan Wangji had already reached out, taken the food for him, and paid for it.

"Oops, sorry," Wei Wuxian said. "Why does this always happen? It's like every time I want to treat you to something, it never works out."

"It is fine," Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian took a bite of his pancake. "In the past, when I wanted something to eat on this side of the dock, I never had to pay for anything. I just took and ate whatever I pleased. Eat and go, grab and run. The stall owners would submit the tab to Jiang-shushu at the end of every month."

Lan Wangji left a tiny half-moon gap on the round pancake in his hands and said quietly, "You do not have to pay now either."

"Ha ha ha ha ha!" Wei Wuxian hooted with laughter.

He finished the pancake in quick bites and crumpled the greaseproof paper into a ball. Tossing it up and down in his hand for fun, he looked around.

"There aren't many stalls left here. In the past, this place would be crowded with stalls selling all kinds of food no matter how late it was. Lots of people in Lotus Pier would come out at night for midnight snacks. There were lots of boats too. Just as many as the boats over at your place in Caiyi Town. There are far fewer now," he continued. "Lan Zhan, you came too late. You didn't catch this place at its funnest and busiest."

"It is never too late," Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian laughed. "Back when I was studying at the Cloud Recesses, I told you a few times to come have fun with me in Yunmeng, but you always ignored me. I should've been bossier and hauled you here outright. Why are you eating so slowly? Food's not good?"

"Food is taken in silence," Lan Wangji said.

Whenever he ate, he always chewed carefully and swallowed slowly. If he *had* to speak up, he first made sure that there was absolutely nothing in his mouth.

"Then I'll stop talking to you. Eat. I thought you didn't like it—I was even thinking of telling you to give me the rest," Wei Wuxian said.

"Another one, please," Lan Wangji said to the stall owner.

In the end, as Wei Wuxian finished his third pancake, Lan Wangji was still slowly nibbling on his first. Wei Wuxian was leading him farther and farther away from Lotus Pier, pointing out this and that to him everywhere they went.

He really wanted to show Lan Wangji all the places where he'd grown up, played, and run amok—to tell him of all the trouble he'd caused, the fights he'd fought, and the pheasants he'd caught. And then he wanted to observe the subtle changes in Lan Wangji's expression, anticipating each and every one of his reactions.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian called out. "Look at me. Look at this tree!"

Lan Wangji finished his pancake, folded the greaseproof paper into a neat little square, and held it in his hand. He looked over to where Wei Wuxian was pointing. It was just an ordinary tree, with a straight trunk and branches stretching outward. It was likely several decades old.

Wei Wuxian went up to the tree and circled it a couple of times before he patted the trunk. "I've climbed this tree before."

"You have climbed every tree we came across," Lan Wangji said.

"This tree's different!" Wei Wuxian said. "This is the first tree I climbed when I came to Lotus Pier, and I did it in the middle of the night. My shijie came out with a lantern to look for me. She waited under the tree to catch me, scared that I'd fall. But how could those skinny arms of hers catch anything? So I still broke a leg."

Lan Wangji glanced at his leg. "Why were you climbing trees in the middle of the night?"

Wei Wuxian bent over with laughter. "No reason. You know me, I just like fooling around in the middle of the night. Ha ha."

With that, he caught two branches and started to climb the tree. He leapt up with practiced ease, stopping only when he reached a spot near the top.

"Yeah, it was around here."

He buried his face in a dense cluster of leaves for a long while before glancing down. His tone was loud and bright, and it seemed to be laced with a smile.

"I thought it was terrifyingly tall back then, but looking at it now, it actually doesn't seem all that high."

The instant he hugged the tree, his eyes grew hot. His vision was already blurred when he looked down.

Lan Wangji was standing beneath the tree, gazing up at him. He was also dressed in white. While he did not have a lantern with

him, the moonlight that cascaded over him made his entire person seem bright and pure, like he was bathed in a soft glow.

He tilted his head back to gaze at the treetop, his eyes fixed. He then took a few steps closer to the tree, looking as though he wanted to extend his arms.

Suddenly, an unusually powerful urge jolted through Wei Wuxian's mind.

He wanted to fall again, just as he had back then.

Deep inside him, a voice whispered, *If he catches me, I'll…*

At that last word, Wei Wuxian let go.

Seeing him plunge without warning, Lan Wangji's eyes instantly widened. He dashed forward just in time to catch Wei Wuxian—or rather, for Wei Wuxian to throw himself into his arms.



By all appearances, Lan Wangji was a well-bred and refined young master. Although he was slender, his strength was not to be underestimated. Not only were his arms astoundingly powerful, but his sturdy lower body gave him rock-solid balance. But this was a grown man who had jumped from a tree, after all—even though he caught Wei Wuxian, he staggered a step back before he steadied himself and stood firm. Just as Lan Wangji was about to release him, he realized that Wei Wuxian's arms were wound tight around his neck, keeping him in place.

He couldn't see Wei Wuxian's face. Wei Wuxian couldn't see his either, but there was no need. He closed his eyes and breathed in deep, filling his lungs with Lan Wangji's cool, refreshing sandalwood scent.

"Thanks," he said in a hoarse voice.

He wasn't scared of falling. He had fallen many times over the years. But hitting the ground still hurt.

How wonderful it would be if there was someone there to catch him.

Hearing his thanks, Lan Wangji's body seemed to freeze for a moment. The hand he'd been about to place on Wei Wuxian's back paused briefly before withdrawing.

After a moment of silence, Lan Wangji answered, "You are welcome."

They remained embracing for a while. Once Wei Wuxian separated from him, straightened up, and got back on his feet, he was back to his usual self again. As if nothing had happened, he announced, "Let's go back!"

"No more sightseeing?" Lan Wangji asked.

"We're still sightseeing!" Wei Wuxian responded. "But there's nothing more to see outside. There's only wilderness ahead, and we've seen enough of that over the past few days. Let's go back to Lotus Pier. I'll show you one last place."

The two returned to the docks and re-entered the main gates of Lotus Pier. When they crossed the drilling grounds and passed a small, resplendent building, Wei Wuxian paused and did a double take, wearing an odd expression.

"What is the matter?" Lan Wangji asked.

Wei Wuxian shook his head. "It's nothing. The house I used to live in was here, but now it's gone. Torn down, just as I thought. These are all newly built."

They passed one magnificent building after another until they came to a quiet spot in the depths of Lotus Pier, standing before a black octagonal hall. Wei Wuxian pushed the door open gently, as if afraid of startling someone, and walked inside.

Row after row of memorial tablets were neatly set up in the hall, placed front and center. This was the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng's ancestral hall.

Wei Wuxian fetched a prostration cushion and took three incense sticks from the altar. He lit them with the candle and stuck them in the bronze censer before the memorial tablets. Then he kneeled and kowtowed thrice to two particular memorial tablets.

"I used to be a frequent guest here," he said to Lan Wangji.

With a look of understanding, Lan Wangji said, "Punishment by kneeling?"

"How did you know?" Wei Wuxian marveled. "It certainly was. Madam Yu used to punish me like that almost every other day."

Lan Wangji nodded. "I have heard a little."

"How is it a *little*, if word managed to spread from Yunmeng all the way to Gusu?" Wei Wuxian said. "But to be honest, I've never seen a woman as bad-tempered as Madam Yu, even after all these years. She'd order me to march to the ancestral hall and kneel over every little thing, ha ha ha…"

But other than that, Madam Yu had never genuinely done anything to harm him.

He suddenly remembered that this was the ancestral hall, and Madam Yu's memorial tablet was right in front of him. He hurriedly apologized, "Sorry, sorry."

To make up for shooting his mouth off, he lit another three incense sticks. He was just holding them above his head and mentally apologizing when a shadow fell over him. Wei Wuxian cocked his head to look and found Lan Wangji had also kneeled beside him.

Since he had entered an ancestral hall, propriety demanded he pay his respects. Lan Wangji took three incense sticks and pushed up his sleeve to light them using a red candle at the side of the altar. His movements were impeccable, his expression solemn. Wei Wuxian tilted his head and watched him, the corners of his lips lifting slightly despite himself.

Lan Wangji glanced at him. "Incense ash," he reminded.

The three incense sticks in Wei Wuxian's hands had been burning for a while, and the accumulated ash on top was about to fall off. Still, Wei Wuxian was reluctant to stick them in the censer.

"Let's do it together," he said instead, face serious.

Lan Wangji did not object. With three incense sticks each in hand, both kneeling before the rows of memorial tablets, they bowed together to Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan's names.

Once. Twice.

Their movements were completely in sync.

"It's done," Wei Wuxian said before solemnly tucking the incense sticks into the bronze censer.

He peered at Lan Wangji, who was kneeling in a prim and proper manner beside him.



He put his palms together and said silently, *Jiang-shushu, Madam Yu—it's me again, here to disturb your peace. I really wanted to bring this person here to show him to you, though. Please consider those two bows our wedding bows to the Heaven, the Earth, the father, and the mother*[6]*. So please—help me lock this guy down first. Let me owe you the third and final wedding bow for now. I'll find a chance to make good on it in the future…*

A snort suddenly echoed from behind them.

Wei Wuxian was in the middle of praying, and the sound startled him. His eyes flew open, and he looked back—only to see Jiang Cheng standing in the open space outside the ancestral hall, his arms crossed.

"Wei Wuxian, it seems you really don't consider yourself an outsider. Coming and going as you please, and bringing people with you too," Jiang Cheng said coolly. "Do you still remember who this house belongs to? Or who its master is?"

Seeing they had been discovered by Jiang Cheng despite avoiding him earlier, Wei Wuxian knew there was no escaping a bout of verbal abuse. Not wanting to start an argument, he said, "I didn't take Hanguang-jun to any other restricted areas of Lotus Pier. I just came to pay my respects and offer some incense to Jiang-shushu and Madam Yu. It's done. We're leaving now."

"If you're leaving, then please go as far away as possible," Jiang Cheng said. "Don't let me hear or see you fooling around in Lotus Pier again."

Wei Wuxian's eyebrows twitched. He saw Lan Wangji grip the hilt of his sword and quickly reached out, pressing his hand down to stay the motion.

"Watch your words," Lan Wangji said to Jiang Cheng.

"Seems to me you two should watch your *behavior* instead," Jiang Cheng rebutted brusquely.

Wei Wuxian's eyebrows twitched even harder. His sense of foreboding intensified.

"Hanguang-jun, let's go," he said to Lan Wangji.

He turned around and kowtowed a few more times in earnest to Jiang Fengmian and Madam Yu. Only then did he stand together with Lan Wangji.

Jiang Cheng didn't forbid him from kowtowing, but he didn't hold back his sarcasm either. "You certainly do need to kneel before them—to apologize for showing up in front of them for no reason, sullying their eyes, and violating their peace."

Wei Wuxian glanced at him. "I'm just offering some incense, okay?" he said calmly.

"Offering incense?" Jiang Cheng said. "Wei Wuxian, do you have no self-awareness? You were expelled from my family a long time ago. And yet you bring riffraff here to offer incense to my parents?"

Wei Wuxian had already stepped halfway past him to leave, but when he heard this, he suddenly stopped in his tracks. "Make yourself clear," he said darkly. "Who is this riffraff you're referring to?"

Had he been alone, he could have pretended not to hear a thing Jiang Cheng said. But Lan Wangji was with him. No matter what, he didn't want Lan Wangji to suffer Jiang Cheng's increasingly ugly words and aggression.

"You're so forgetful," Jiang Cheng said derisively. "What do I mean by riffraff? Well, let me remind you. All of Lotus Pier perished—including my parents—because you played the hero to save that Lan-er-gongzi next to you. But no, that wasn't enough. You had to go back for a second round. You just *had* to save those Wen dogs, and you dragged my jiejie and the others into your mess. What a great man you are. Even better, you're so magnanimous that you brought these two to Lotus Pier—let the Wen dog wander around in

front of our gates and escorted Lan-er-gongzi here to offer incense. You're deliberately trying to upset them and me.

"Wei Wuxian," he continued, "who do you think you are? Who gave you the right to bring others into my family's ancestral hall as you please?"

Wei Wuxian had long known that Jiang Cheng wanted to settle this score with him. Jiang Cheng held Wei Wuxian responsible for the destruction of Lotus Pier. Not just him—he blamed Wen Ning and Lan Wangji too. And now all three of the people he refused to extend any courtesy to were strutting around together, right before his eyes. They had even invited themselves to Lotus Pier. He had probably been absolutely livid for a while now, which was another reason why Wei Wuxian had wanted to do this behind his back.

He had nothing to say in his own defense when Jiang Cheng blamed him. But there was no way he could tolerate Lan Wangji being vilified.

"Jiang Cheng," Wei Wuxian said. "Listen to what you're saying. Is it even fit for hearing? Don't forget your status—you're a family head, after all. And yet you just insulted a distinguished cultivator of a prominent cultivation clan, right in front of Jiang-shushu and everyone else's memorial tablets. What happened to your upbringing? Where are your manners?"

He meant to remind Jiang Cheng that he ought to show some respect to Lan Wangji. But to Jiang Cheng's sensitive ears, it sounded like Wei Wuxian was insinuating he wasn't qualified to be the head of the family. Immediately, darkness touched his countenance. Surprisingly, his expression bore some resemblance to Madam Yu's look of fury.

"*Who* exactly is the one humiliating my parents in front of their memorial tablets?!" he snapped. "Please recall whose family home you're in. Get it through your thick skull. It's bad enough that you were being so shamelessly touchy-feely outside. Don't come to *my* ancestral hall and fool around in front of *my* parents' memorial

tablets! They watched you grow up, for whatever that's worth. Even *I* feel embarrassed for you!"

Never in his wildest dreams had Wei Wuxian imagined such a heavy blow would strike him, let alone catch him so off guard. Both shocked and furious, he bellowed, *"Shut up!"*

Jiang Cheng pointed outside. "Go outside and fool around however you please, if that's what you want to do. Whether under a tree or on a boat, whether you want to hug or do *whatever* else! Get the hell out of my house and get the hell out of my sight!"

Wei Wuxian's heart stopped for a second when he heard "under a tree" mentioned. Could Jiang Cheng have seen him pounce into Lan Wangji's arms?

He had guessed correctly.

Jiang Cheng had indeed personally gone out to look for Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji. He had trailed them, following the directions given by the vendor at the dock. A voice deep inside him seemed to tell him where Wei Wuxian would go, and he caught up with them after searching for a while. But when he found them, he was greeted by the sight of Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji tightly embracing under a tree—loath to part even as the minutes ticked by.

Goosebumps had broken out all over Jiang Cheng's body right then and there.

Although he had once maliciously speculated about the relationship between Lan Wangji and the person he'd thought at the time was Mo Xuanyu, those had just been words meant to embarrass Wei Wuxian, not genuine suspicion. He had never thought Wei Wuxian would have such questionable involvement with men. After all, they had grown up together, and Wei Wuxian had never expressed interest in such things—rather, he had always been ardently fond of young, pretty girls. It seemed even less possible for Lan Wangji to have such tendencies—he was famous for his asceticism and appeared uninterested in men and women alike.

But no matter how Jiang Cheng looked at it, the way they hugged wasn't normal. At least, it certainly wasn't something shared between normal friends or brothers. He immediately recalled that Wei Wuxian had stuck like glue to Lan Wangji ever since his return, and also that Lan Wangji's attitude toward him was the complete opposite of how it had been in the past. Jiang Cheng was immediately certain they really were in *that* kind of relationship.

He couldn't turn around and go back, and he didn't want to step forward and address the two of them either. So he stayed hidden and followed them.

Every movement, every look they shared—they all inevitably took on a different significance under his gaze. For a moment, the feeling of disbelief, oddness, and slight disgust added up to something that eclipsed even his hatred.

When Wei Wuxian had brought Lan Wangji into the ancestral hall, his pent-up fury had reawakened, engulfing his sanity and sense of decorum.

Wei Wuxian looked as though he was forcibly holding something back. "Jiang Wanyin, you… Apologize right now."

"Apologize? Why should I? For stumbling on your rendezvous?" Jiang Cheng sneered with biting sarcasm.

"Hanguang-jun and I are just friends," Wei Wuxian fumed. "What kind of relationship do you think we have?! I'm warning you—you better apologize right now! Don't make me kick your ass!"

Lan Wangji's expression froze at this.

Jiang Cheng, on the other hand, scoffed. "Then I've never seen a 'friend' like that in my life. And you're *warning* me? On what grounds? If either of you possessed even the slightest bit of shame, you wouldn't have come here…"

Wei Wuxian saw the change in Lan Wangji's expression and thought that Jiang Cheng's words had stung him. He was so angry that his entire body shook. He didn't even dare imagine what Lan

Wangji thought of being insulted like that. His fury blazed brighter, the blood rushed to his head, and he flung out a talisman.

"Are you done?!"

The talisman was fast and merciless. It struck Jiang Cheng on his right shoulder and exploded with a thunderous bang, causing him to stagger. He hadn't expected Wei Wuxian to strike so suddenly, and his own spiritual powers had yet to fully recover. As a result, the blast caught him head-on and his shoulder began to bleed.

Disbelief flashed across his face, and Zidian shot from his finger, sizzling and flashing haphazardly as it lashed out.

Lan Wangji's Bichen left its sheath to block the attack, and with that, the three of them were fighting in front of the ancestral hall.

Jiang Cheng's eyes were bloodshot. "Fine!" he growled. "You want a fight? Then bring it on! You think I'm afraid of you both?!"

Wei Wuxian haphazardly warded off a few blows, then abruptly came to his senses. This was the ancestral hall of the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng. He had just been kneeling here, praying for the blessings of Jiang Fengmian and Madam Yu. And now he was attacking their son right in front of them, together with Lan Wangji!

It was like he'd been doused in icy water. His vision went first dark, then white. Lan Wangji glanced at him before whirling around to grab his shoulder.

Jiang Cheng's expression changed too. He retracted his whip, then blinked, looking alert.

"Wei Ying?!" Lan Wangji called out.

His low voice buzzed and reverberated incessantly in Wei Wuxian's head. Wei Wuxian wondered if his ears had been damaged.

"What's wrong?"

He felt something creeping down his face and raised his hand to touch it, only to come away with a palm covered in red. The dizziness was accompanied by fresh blood trickling from his mouth and nose, dripping to the ground.

This time, he was finally not faking it.

Wei Wuxian grabbed Lan Wangji's elbow and managed with some difficulty to stand. Seeing that Lan Wangji's newly changed white clothes were stained with his blood once more, he unconsciously reached out to wipe them. An untimely worry echoed in his mind: *I got his clothes dirty again.*

"How do you feel?!" Lan Wangji demanded urgently.

Wei Wuxian replied without answering the question. "Lan Zhan… Let's leave."

Leave right now.

And never come back.

"All right," Lan Wangji said.

Lan Wangji had no intention of continuing to wrangle with Jiang Cheng. Without a word, he lifted Wei Wuxian on his back and made to leave.

Jiang Cheng was both shocked and suspicious—shocked by the disturbing sight of Wei Wuxian bleeding so suddenly from his seven orifices, and suspicious that this was an act he was putting on to escape. After all, Wei Wuxian often used such tricks to prank others.

Seeing they were both about to leave, he barked, "Hold it right there!"

Lan Wangji fumed. "Get lost!"

With his words came an abruptly raging Bichen. Immediately after, a flash of purple lightning hurtled forth as well. Both divine weapons struck each other, letting loose a long, ear-piercing yowl. The impact of this noise gave Wei Wuxian a splitting headache, and

like a flickering candle flame that was finally extinguished, his eyes closed and his head drooped low.

Sensing the sudden weight on his shoulder, Lan Wangji promptly extracted himself from the melee to feel for his breathing.

With Bichen's master no longer supplying it with power, Zidian immediately advanced toward them. Jiang Cheng, who didn't actually want to injure Lan Wangji, instantly pulled back his strike—but it seemed it was still too late.

Just then, a figure leapt down from nowhere and stood between them.

This uninvited guest who had inserted themselves into the fight was Wen Ning. Jiang Cheng immediately flew into a rage.

"Who said you could enter Lotus Pier?! *How dare you?!*"

He could tolerate anyone else, if only barely—but he could never tolerate this Wen dog who had thrust his fist through Jin Zixuan's heart and destroyed his elder sister's happiness and life. Simply laying eyes on him made Jiang Cheng want to kill him for personal satisfaction alone. To think he'd dare set foot on Lotus Pier's soil—he was clearly asking to die!

Wen Ning still felt guilty about those two lost lives, as well as many other things. He feared Jiang Cheng, as a result, and always made a conscious effort to avoid him. But now he was facing him directly to shield Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji. He took the brutal lash of the whip, and though a horrifying scorch mark raked across his chest, he did not shrink back.

Only when Lan Wangji determined that Wei Wuxian had merely fallen temporarily unconscious due to exhaustion and rage did he tear his gaze away. He saw Wen Ning holding something out to Jiang Cheng.

In Jiang Cheng's right hand, Zidian shone so bright it was almost white. The lightning flared, just as his murderous intent did the same. Jiang Cheng was so furious he had to laugh.

"What do you want?"

Wen Ning was holding Wei Wuxian's sword, Suibian. Wei Wuxian had found it a hassle to carry around during their journey, so he'd dumped it here, there, and everywhere before finally dumping it on Wen Ning for safekeeping.

Holding it up, Wen Ning said, "Pull it out."

His tone was resolute, and his gaze firm. It was completely unlike his habitually absentminded, blank expression.

"I'm warning you," Jiang Cheng said. "If you don't want to be reduced to ashes again, take your feet off the soil of Lotus Pier this instant. Scram!"

Wen Ning was almost jabbing the hilt of the sword into Jiang Cheng's chest. He raised his voice and ordered him again, "Do it. *Pull it out!*"

Jiang Cheng bristled with anger and irritation. His heart pounded wildly for no reason he could identify. Inexplicably, he did as Wen Ning ordered and grabbed hold of Suibian's hilt to yank it from its simple, unadorned sheath—

And the snow-white blade slipped free, bright with a blinding sheen.

Jiang Cheng stared down at the glinting longsword in his hand for a long time before his mind returned to him.

This sword was Suibian. This was Wei Wuxian's sword. It had been taken by the Jin Clan of Lanling after the Siege of the Burial Mounds as a trophy for their collection. No one had ever been able to unsheathe it after that, since it had long since sealed itself of its own accord.

How had *he* managed to pull it out? Had the sword's seal been lifted?

"It's not that the sword's seal has been lifted!" Wen Ning said, reading his thoughts. "It's still sealed, even now. If you sheathe it

and order someone else to draw it, they won't be able to, no matter who they are."

Jiang Cheng's mind and face were both racked with confusion. "Then why was *I* able to pull it out?"

"Because the sword recognizes you as Wei-gongzi," Wen Ning answered.

Lan Wangji stood up, lifting an unconscious Wei Wuxian on his back.

"What do you mean, it recognizes me as Wei Wuxian?" Jiang Cheng snapped. "How?! Why me?!"

"Because the golden core presently channeling spiritual power in your body is *his*!" Wen Ning snapped back, even harsher.

Jiang Cheng was stunned for a good while before he shouted at him. "What nonsense are you spouting?!"

However, Wen Ning looked quite composed. "I'm not spouting nonsense."

"Shut up! My golden core… My golden core was…"

"Restored by Baoshan-sanren," Wen Ning finished for him.

"How did you know?" Jiang Cheng snapped. "He even told you about that?"

"No," Wen Ning answered. "Wei-gongzi never spoke a word of it to anyone else. I saw it with my own eyes."

Jiang Cheng's eyes were bloodshot as he barked a laugh. "You're lying! You were there? How could you have been there? I was the only one who went up the mountain. You couldn't have followed me!"

"I didn't follow you," Wen Ning said. "I was on that mountain all along."

Veins bulged on Jiang Cheng's forehead. "…You're *lying*!"

"Hear me out, and then you can decide for yourself if I'm lying!" Wen Ning said. "When you went up the mountain, you had a strip of black cloth covering your eyes and a long tree branch in your hand. When you were almost at the top of the mountain, you entered a stone forest. It took you nearly an hour to find your way through it."

The muscles on Jiang Cheng's face twitched slightly.

"Then, you heard the sound of a bell that startled a flock of birds into flight," Wen Ning continued. "You gripped the tree branch in your hand tightly, like you were holding a sword. When the bell stopped sounding, the tip of a sword pressed against the center of your chest. You heard a woman's voice ordering you not to advance."

Jiang Cheng started shaking.

Wen Ning raised his voice. "You immediately stopped in your tracks, looking very nervous—even vaguely excited. This woman kept her voice very low. She asked you who you were and how you found your way here. You answered…"

"Shut up!" Jiang Cheng bellowed.

Wen Ning shouted over him. "…You answered that you were Wei Ying, the son of Cangse-sanren! You told her about the slaughter of your clan, the chaos in Lotus Pier, and how your golden core was dissolved by Core-Melting Hand, Wen Zhuliu. The woman repeatedly asked you some questions about your parents. When you answered her final question, you suddenly caught a whiff of a strange fragrance and lost consciousness…"

Jiang Cheng looked like all he wanted was to cover his own ears. "How do you know? How can you know all of this?!"

"Didn't I already tell you?" Wen Ning said. "I was there. Not only was I there, but Wei-gongzi was too. And it wasn't just us. My jiejie, Wen Qing, was there as well. Or rather, it was just the three of us waiting for you on that mountain. Sect Leader Jiang, did you honestly think…that was where Baoshan-sanren lives in seclusion?

Even Wei-gongzi doesn't know where such a place could be. His mother, Cangse-sanren, never divulged any information about her teacher to such a young child! That mountain was just some barren hill in Yiling!"

Jiang Cheng screamed himself hoarse repeating the same word over and over, like he was trying to cover up his sudden dearth of vocabulary with fearsome ferocity. "*Nonsense!* Fucking *enough*! If that's the case, then why was my golden core restored?!"

"Your golden core was never restored," Wen Ning said. "It was completely dissolved by Wen Zhuliu! The reason you *thought* it was restored was because my jiejie, Wen Qing—the best doctor of the Wen Clan of Qishan—cut Wei-gongzi's golden core from his body and used it to replace yours!"

Jiang Cheng's face went blank for a second. "Replaced mine with his?"

"That's right!" Wen Ning said. "Why do you think he never used Suibian again, and never carried his sword with him when he went out? Was it really because of some youthful indiscretion? Did he really enjoy it when others spoke ill of him behind his back or to his face, saying he was rude and had a poor upbringing? It was because bringing it along would be pointless! You see…if he brought his sword along when he was invited to those banquets and Night Hunts, there would inevitably be someone wanting to duel or spar with him for whatever reason. Without his golden core, he had no spiritual power. If he drew his sword, he wouldn't last long at all…"

Jiang Cheng stood dumbly rooted to the spot. He looked queasy, and his lips quivered. He even forgot to use Zidian as he suddenly dropped Suibian to the ground and struck Wen Ning on the chest with his hand.

"*You're lying!"* he bellowed.

Wen Ning was forced a couple steps back from the blow. He picked up Suibian from the ground, sheathed it, and pushed it against Jiang Cheng's chest.

"Take it!"

Jiang Cheng unconsciously took the sword. He didn't move but looked at a loss as his gaze turned toward Wei Wuxian. He would have been fine if he hadn't looked. But when he did, Wei Wuxian's despondent expression and ghastly pale face—with blood still gathered at the corners of his mouth—was like a hammer smashing his heart. Moreover, Lan Wangji's gaze chilled him so keenly he felt like he had plunged into a frozen cavern.

"Take that sword and go to the banquet hall, the drilling grounds, anywhere," Wen Ning said. "Order everyone you come across to pull it from its sheath and see if anyone can! Then you'll see if I'm lying! Sect Leader Jiang, you…you are such a competitive person. All your life, you have been competing with and comparing yourself to others. But know this—you could never have compared to him!"

Jiang Cheng lashed out at Wen Ning with a kick. He ran stumbling in the direction of the banquet hall, Suibian in hand. He howled as he ran, looking utterly crazed.

His kick sent Wen Ning crashing into a tree in the courtyard. Wen Ning slowly stood up, then hastily turned to look at the other two.

Lan Wangji's radiantly handsome face was pale beyond belief. His expression was ice-cold and grave. He cast another glance at the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng's ancestral hall, then adjusted his grip on Wei Wuxian, who was still on his back. Once he had secured his hold, he walked in the other direction without looking back.

"Lan…Lan-gongzi," Wen Ning called out. "Wh-where are you going?"

Lan Wangji paused before the steps. "Earlier, he wanted me to take him away."

Wen Ning hurried to catch up with him and followed him through Lotus Pier's main gates.

They went to the docks to look around. The various boats they had taken to get here had all left after delivering them to their destination. Only a few old, unattended ferryboats remained. They were long and thin, shaped like willow leaves, and capable of carrying seven or eight people. Both ends of the boats were slightly upturned, and there were two oars set at an angle on the stern.

With Wei Wuxian on his back, Lan Wangji stepped onto a boat without hesitation. Wen Ning hurriedly leapt onto the stern and grabbed the oars of his own initiative. He paddled a couple of times, and the ferryboat steadily moved a few meters away from the docks. It didn't take long for them to drift toward the center of the river, following the current.

Lan Wangji let Wei Wuxian lean against him as he fed him two pills. Once he made sure he'd swallowed them properly, he took out a handkerchief and carefully wiped away the blood on his face.

Suddenly, Wen Ning's nervous voice rang out. "Lan…Lan-gongzi."

"What is the matter?" Lan Wangji asked.

The tough front Wen Ning had displayed in front of Jiang Cheng had long since vanished without a trace. Steeling himself, he said, "Please…please don't tell Wei-gongzi that I revealed he extracted his golden core, for now. He warned me very sternly to never say a word about it to anyone. I probably won't be able to hide it for long, but…"

After a moment of silence, Lan Wangji said, "You can rest assured."

Wen Ning looked as though he'd breathed a sigh of relief, although the dead had no breath to expel. He said sincerely, "Thank you, Lan-gongzi."

Lan Wangji shook his head.

"Thank you for speaking up for me and my jiejie back then, at Golden Carp Tower," Wen Ning continued. "I've never forgotten it. I

lost control afterward, and I… I really am very sorry."

Lan Wangji did not respond.

"And more than that, thank you for caring for A-Yuan all these years," Wen Ning went on.

Lan Wangji raised his eyes to look at him.

Wen Ning kept going. "I thought everyone in our family was dead. That not a single person was spared. I really didn't expect A-Yuan to still be alive. He looks so much like my cousin when he was in his twenties."

"He hid in a hole in a tree for too long," Lan Wangji said. "He ran a high fever and was ill for a time."

Wen Ning nodded. "I knew he must have gotten sick. He doesn't remember anything from when he was little. I chatted with him for a long time, and he kept talking about you." He continued, a little dejectedly, "In the past, he used to talk about Wei-gongzi… He never talked about me, anyway."

"You did not tell him," Lan Wangji observed.

"You mean about his past?" Wen Ning asked. "No, I didn't."

He turned his back to the two behind him. As he worked hard to row the boat, he said, "He's doing very well now. Learning too much, remembering such heavy things…will make his life harder."

"He has to learn eventually," Lan Wangji said.

Wen Ning was stumped for a moment before he said, "You're right. He has to learn eventually." He gazed at the sky. "Just like Wei-gongzi and Sect Leader Jiang. Sect Leader Jiang had to learn about the core transfer eventually. Wei-gongzi couldn't possibly have kept Sect Leader Jiang in the dark his whole life."

The night was still and quiet, and the river's current was deep and heavy.

Out of the blue, Lan Wangji asked, "Is it painful?"

"What?" Wen Ning said.

"Extracting one's core. Is it painful?"

"Lan-gongzi. You wouldn't believe me if I told you no, would you?"

"I assumed Wen Qing would have found a way."

"Before going up the mountain, my jiejie prepared many anesthetics in hopes of alleviating the pain of extracting his core. But later, she realized such medication would be completely useless. If the subject is in a numbed state when the golden core is extracted from the body, it affects the core's stability. It becomes harder to prevent it from dissipating."

"…Therefore?" Lan Wangji probed.

Wen Ning pausing in his rowing. "Therefore, the subject of the golden core extraction procedure has to be completely conscious for its full duration."

He had to be conscious as he watched his golden core be cut from his meridians and extracted from his body. He had to feel his surging spiritual energy gradually subsiding, calming, turning ordinary—until it became a pool of stagnant water that could no longer make waves.

It was a long time before Lan Wangji found his voice again. It was a little raspy, and the words he spoke seemed to tremble. "Its *full* duration?"

"For one day and two nights," Wen Ning said. "He remained conscious throughout."

"At the time, how confident were you of success?"

"About fifty percent."



"Fifty percent." Lan Wangji soundlessly drew a deep breath and shook his head. He repeated, "…Fifty percent."

His hand tightened its hold on Wei Wuxian's waist, gripping so hard his knuckles turned white.

"After all, no one had ever conducted any sort of core-swapping procedure before," Wen Ning said. "My jiejie had written essays on the subject, but they were only theoretical. No one would ever let her experiment on them, so the theories remained untested. The sect's seniors said she was indulging in flights of fancy, that the idea was completely impractical. They knew no one would ever be willing to extract their golden core and give it to someone else—because if they did, they would be fundamentally crippled. They would never reach the pinnacle of their ability but would remain mediocre the rest of their life.

"So when Wei-gongzi returned to seek us out, my jiejie was reluctant to even attempt the procedure, at first. She warned him that writing an essay was one thing, but actually *doing* it was quite another. She wasn't even confident she'd have a fifty percent chance of success.

"But Wei-gongzi kept pestering her. He said fifty percent was fine; the chances of success and failure were equal. Even if it didn't work out and his core was wasted, he wasn't worried about his future—but that wasn't the case for Sect Leader Jiang. He was too competitive, too focused on what he stood to gain and lose in this aspect, since cultivation was his life. And if Sect Leader Jiang could only ever be an ordinary, mediocre person, his life would be over."

Lan Wangji lowered his gaze. His eyes, light as glass, gazed at Wei Wuxian's face. He reached out, but ultimately only brushed Wei Wuxian's cheek with his fingertips.

Wen Ning glanced back and couldn't resist asking about his reaction. "Lan-gongzi, you don't seem very surprised. Did you… already know?"

"…All I knew was that his spiritual power had likely been damaged somehow," Lan Wangji rasped with some difficulty.

But he had not known that this was the truth.

"If not for this…" Wen Ning trailed off.

If not for the fact that he really had no other path to take…

Just then, the head reclining on Lan Wangji's shoulder jerked a little. Wei Wuxian's eyelashes fluttered as he gradually came to.

Chapter 20:
Day and Night

— Part 1 —

WEN NING QUICKLY went quiet. Amidst the splash of the oars paddling through the water, Wei Wuxian opened his eyes and found he had a splitting headache.

He was leaning his full weight on Lan Wangji. Quickly realizing they were no longer in Lotus Pier, he was confused until he saw Lan Wangji's left hand—specifically, the spots of blood on his sleeve. It looked like a bunch of plum blossoms scattered over snowy ground. Only then did he recall what had happened before he passed out from vexation.

A variety of grimaces swirled across his face. He abruptly sat up. Lan Wangji moved to assist him, but the ringing in Wei Wuxian's ears hadn't yet subsided, and there was a clot of bloody qi stifling his chest. He was utterly miserable.

Worried he'd cough blood all over Lan Wangji, who so valued neatness and cleanliness, he repeatedly waved him off and turned to the side. He supported himself against the edge of the boat and tried to endure the next wave of discomfort. Lan Wangji, who knew he wasn't feeling well right now, stayed quiet and asked no questions. He laid a hand on his back, and a thin, gentle stream of spiritual energy flowed into his body.

Once the metallic taste in his throat had abated, Wei Wuxian finally turned his head to motion for Lan Wangji to remove his hand. After meditating briefly, he finally tried to speak.

"Hanguang-jun, how did we escape?"

Wen Ning immediately tensed nervously and stopped paddling. Lan Wangji kept his word and betrayed nothing of the secrets he had exposed, but he also did not fabricate a lie.

"There was a fight," he explained simply.

Wei Wuxian rubbed at his chest, over his heart, trying to disperse the blockage there. However, not a few moments later, he was unable to refrain from venting.

"I just *knew* Jiang Cheng wouldn't let us go so easily," he huffed. "That little asshole… Absolutely outrageous!"

Lan Wangji's brow furrowed, and he said darkly, "Do not mention him."

A little taken aback by his unfriendly tone, Wei Wuxian immediately acquiesced. "Okay, we won't talk about him."

After a brief moment of deliberation, he said, "Um, Hanguang-jun, don't mind what he said, okay?"

"Regarding what?" Lan Wangji asked.

Wei Wuxian's eyelid twitched forebodingly. "Everything. He's always been like that, ever since he was little. Whenever he gets angry, he throws manners to the wind and forgets to watch his words, so he always manages to be especially offensive. As long as he can piss people off, he'll say whatever nasty things pop into his head. He hasn't grown up in the slightest, even after all these years. So don't you take any of it to heart."

As he spoke, he secretly observed Lan Wangji's expression, and his heart slowly sank.

He had thought, or rather hoped, that Lan Wangji hadn't taken Jiang Cheng's words to heart. But to his surprise, Lan Wangji looked rather upset. He didn't even respond with a "mn." It would seem Lan Wangji had been more affected by Jiang Cheng's nasty words than he'd expected. Perhaps he simply didn't like Jiang Cheng, period. Or perhaps…he could not tolerate being called "shameless" or "riffraff." After all, the Lan Clan of Gusu was a distinguished, prominent clan

whose motto was “Elegance and Righteousness.” Hanguang-jun had likely never had such words slung at him before.

In the time they’d been traveling together, he’d gotten the feeling Lan Wangji thought highly of him. That he thought of him differently than he once had. But at the end of the day, he didn’t dare guess how far that “highly” stretched, nor whether “differently” really was the kind of “different” he assumed.

Wei Wuxian had never considered confidence a bad thing and was often smug and frivolous as a result. The cultivation world had once gossiped that the Yiling Patriarch was the sort who frolicked among the peach blossoms, always surrounded by the sweet smell of their fragrant flowers.[7] But in reality, he had never experienced this kind of flustered confusion before. In the past, he had thought Lan Wangji was an open book, but now he found him difficult to read. He was terrified that he was lost in this fantasy all alone; that all of this was only his own wishful thinking and that he was overly confident to presume otherwise.

Lan Wangji was silent, unspeaking. Wei Wuxian wanted to muddle past this by doing what he was best at—joking around. But he was also scared that trying to force the conversation into a teasing turn would mire them in even more awkwardness. He was stuck.

This silent turmoil stretched on for a bit until he abruptly said, “Where’re we going?”

It was a terribly forced change of subject, but Lan Wangji cooperatively went along. “Where do you want to go?”

Wei Wuxian rubbed the back of his head. “Zewu-jun’s safety is still uncertain, and we don’t know what those people back there were planning to do either. Why don’t we go to Lanling…” Something occurred to him, and he changed his mind. “No, let’s not go to Lanling. Let’s go to Yunping.”

“Yunping City?” Lan Wangji asked.

"Yes," Wei Wuxian said. "Yunping City in Yunmeng. I told you earlier, right? Back at Golden Carp Tower, I saw my own manuscripts inside the secret chamber of Fragrance Palace, and next to them, a land deed for a place in Yunping. The Jin Clan of Lanling is wealthy and influential. I can't imagine Jin Guangyao would have hidden that land deed away so well if it didn't hold secrets. Maybe we'll discover something there."

Lan Wangji inclined his head in agreement.

"Gongzi," Wen Ning spoke up just then. "Is this the right direction to Yunping?"

"What the…" Wei Wuxian blurted.

He and Lan Wangji were both sitting with their backs to the stern, so he hadn't seen Wen Ning. Startled out of his skin to hear someone speak up behind him all of a sudden, Wei Wuxian tumbled forward. He turned to look at Wen Ning, visibly shaken.

"Why are you here?!"

Wen Ning stared at him, dumbfounded. "Me? I've always been here."

"Then why didn't you say something?" Wei Wuxian demanded.

"Gongzi, you and Hanguang-jun were talking, so I didn't…" Wen Ning began to explain himself.

"You should still make some noise or something!"

Wen Ning briefly raised one of the oars in his hand to demonstrate. "Gongzi, I've been rowing all this time. I've been making noise. Did you not hear me?"

"…" Wei Wuxian waved him off. "I wasn't paying attention. Never mind, never mind. Stop paddling. The current is rapid at night. We'll travel fast even if you aren't rowing."

He had grown up in Yunmeng and swum through all the waters in the area, so he was familiar with them. Wen Ning heeded him and put down the oars, then cautiously sat down at the end of

the boat, leaving at least two meters of distance between himself and the other two.

It had been yin time, the dawn light of morning, when they had arrived at Lotus Pier. After everything they'd been through, the sun had grown faintly brighter, and white diffused the blue of the skies. They could finally see the contours of the river's shores.

After examining their surroundings, Wei Wuxian said, "I'm hungry."

Lan Wangji raised his eyes. Wei Wuxian was, of course, not hungry in the least; he had just eaten three pancakes outside the main gates of Lotus Pier. But Lan Wangji had only eaten one, and that had been the only thing he had consumed in almost two days. Wei Wuxian was getting concerned about him. He knew the road ahead was devoid of settlements, and they likely faced a very long journey by water before they would encounter a town or city in which they could rest and buy food.

Lan Wangji considered this statement briefly before he suggested, "Pull ashore?"

"There isn't really anything on the shores nearby," Wei Wuxian said. "But I know a place."

Wen Ning quickly picked up the oars and paddled the boat in the direction indicated. It didn't take long before they turned onto a different branch of the river. After traveling a while, they finally steered into a vast lake filled with lotuses.

A canopy of lotus leaves covered the water. Their stems varied in height, though all grew straight and tall. The long, thin ferryboat pushed through the crowd of stems and steered toward the heart of the pond. Seen from above, the boat drew a line of nodding green leaves in its wake. Passing under the cover of these green umbrellas, full, plump lotus seed pods popped into view once the large leaves were peeled aside. The feeling in that split second of discovery was very much akin to suddenly finding a small hoard of treasure.

Wearing a wide grin, Wei Wuxian reached out, ready to start picking the pods. However, Lan Wangji suddenly called to him.

"Wei Ying."

"What is it?"

"Does this lotus pond belong to anyone?"

"Of course not," Wei Wuxian answered, appearing wholly without qualms.

But of course, it did. Ever since Wei Wuxian was eleven years old, he'd often stolen lotus seed pods and water chestnuts from the various lakes in Yunmeng. He had washed his hands of that dirty business for many years, but they had to get a bite to eat for the road now, so he had no choice but to come out of retirement.

"I have heard the lotus ponds in this area all have owners," Lan Wangji commented evenly.

"…Ha ha ha ha ha, really? How very unfortunate then." Wei Wuxian laughed it off. "Wow, you've heard so many things that even I don't know. Come on, let's go."

Since he'd been exposed, of course he didn't have the face to make Lan Wangji join him in mischief. The idea of the esteemed Hanguang-jun stealing someone's lotus pods…that was as outrageous as it got. He was just about to steer them away with the oars, embarrassed, when Lan Wangji reached out and picked a pod.

He handed it to Wei Wuxian and stated, "There will be no next time."

Wei Wuxian went on a pod-picking rampage all in one go, utterly greedy and insatiable, piling the boat so high with them that there was practically no room left to sit. The three of them sat atop the luscious green mountain of lotus seed pods. Peeling open the green skin, one could see the tender seeds hiding inside the dense fibrous head. These seeds, when plucked one by one, were snow-white and delicately tender, with a faint sweetness. They were most

refreshing and delicious. Their core was also a fresh, lustrous green, and not bitter in the least.

Wen Ning sat at the boat's bow and worked nonstop to peel the pods, while Lan Wangji peeled and ate only a few before stopping. When Wen Ning handed him some peeled seeds, Lan Wangji shook his head and indicated that he should give them to Wei Wuxian instead. Wei Wuxian, for his part, cleaned out the entire boat on his own.

They floated along with the current for a few more hours before arriving at the pier of Yunping City.

The shallow waters of the harbor were crowded with fishing boats. There were women gathered by the stone steps washing clothes and some bare-chested boys with tanned, bronze skin swimming in the river and doing quick dives beneath the surface. All of a sudden, these people saw a ferryboat leisurely drifting along. The one at the tail end of the boat kept his head bowed, but the boat's other occupants—two young men—were both extraordinary in appearance. The one sitting with poise at the very front was a man dressed all in white. While his robes were plain, they were as dazzling as snow, and his bearing was otherworldly. The pretty boy giggling next to him was also extremely good-looking. It was rare to see such characters around these parts, and the people couldn't help but stare eagerly with widened eyes.

The swimming boys gathered around the ferryboat like a school of fish, their heads surfacing next to it.

"Might I ask if this is Yunping?" Wei Wuxian inquired.

One of the girls washing clothes by the river blushed as she replied, "Yes, it is."

"We're here. Let's go ashore," Wei Wuxian said.

They steered the ferryboat to the bank. Lan Wangji was the first to stand and disembark. He turned around to give Wei Wuxian a hand, and the two stepped off. Wen Ning, however, was having a hard time getting out of the boat. The swimming boys had noticed

that he kept his head bowed and remained unspeaking, and saw his ghastly pale skin and the strange patterns on his neck and face. He looked peculiar, but instead of being scared, they found it rather interesting. Dozens of hands grabbed the sides of the boat and started rocking it nonstop, making Wen Ning lose his balance.

When Wei Wuxian turned and saw this, he shouted, "Hey! What're you doing? Don't pick on him."

"Gongzi, I can't get down," Wen Ning quickly said.

As he pleaded for help, two more boys slapped the surface of the water to splash him. Wen Ning was smiling miserably, at a loss for what to do. Had the boys known the "person" they were messing with could easily tear them into bloody chunks and crush the crumbs of their bones to dust with his bare hands, they probably wouldn't have dared seek this sort of fun.

Wei Wuxian hurled out the few remaining lotus seed pods. "Catch!"

The boys scattered in a flurry of motion and swam off to snatch up the seed pods. Only then did Wen Ning finally jump to shore, though in quite a sorry state. He patted the dripping wet hems of his robes.

Compared to the region of Yunmeng as a whole, the city of Yunping was sizable and fairly prosperous. There were fine shops and pedestrians all along the way as the three of them strolled into the city. Wen Ning didn't like crowded places, so after a while, he silently disappeared once more.

Wei Wuxian asked around for directions as they walked, steering them based on his memory of the address. When they finally reached their destination and confirmed what they were looking at, they were both a little surprised.

Gazing at the extraordinarily magnificent building that teemed with worshippers, Wei Wuxian asked in an uncertain tone, "This is…a Guanyin temple?"

"Mn," Lan Wangji answered in the affirmative.

Jin Guangyao didn't seem like the devoutly religious sort. The two exchanged a look and then pushed through the endless crowds of devotees, crossed the very tall threshold, and entered the temple. The temple had three gated entrances. Incense smoke and the clacking of wooden fish filled the air.

It didn't take them long to make an entire round of the place. The final building was Guanyin Hall. The two hadn't been standing for long outside the entrance before a monk with his hands pressed together in prayer came to greet them. The two returned the courtesy, and Wei Wuxian began to exchange some pleasantries.

"Temples are usually built in the mountains. It's pretty rare to see one based out of a city," Wei Wuxian casually commented.

The monk smiled. "The people of the city work hard all day. Do they not need a temple of Guanyin near them, to pray for good fortune and seek inner peace?"

Wei Wuxian smiled back. "Won't Guanyin be disturbed by all the noise and people?"

"The bodhisattva bring deliverance to the people, so how could they be disturbed by them?"

"Is Guanyin the only one worshipped in this temple?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Yes."

They'd already walked around the Guanyin temple a few times and familiarized themselves with it. Once they exited the premises, Wei Wuxian pulled Lan Wangji into an alley. He picked up a stick and used it to draw a square array on the ground before discarding it.

"Jin Guangyao sure put in some major work here."

Lan Wangji picked up the tossed stick and added a few more strokes to the array. The added details made it obvious that this was an overhead view of the Guanyin Temple.

Wei Wuxian took the stick from his hand. “There’s another major array formation inside the temple. Something’s sealed in there.” He pointed at a spot and said, “The design is complicated and pretty secure, but as soon as the heart of the array is broken, whatever it’s sealing will come out.”

Lan Wangji rose to his feet. “In the evening, when all is deserted, we shall unravel the array. Let us seek a place to settle before drafting a plan.”

They didn’t know how formidable the evil spirit sealed within this Guanyin Temple might be, so they couldn’t risk moving during the day, when there were crowds around.

“I wonder how long it’ll take to knock out the thing inside this Guanyin Temple. Will we have time to go to Lanling? Will this delay our travel plans?”

“Your current condition is uncertain. Do not force yourself,” Lan Wangji said.

The fight at the Burial Mounds had drained too much of Wei Wuxian’s strength. His mind and body had been tense for a very a long time, and it was only hours ago that he’d been so infuriated by Jiang Cheng that he bled from his apertures. It had taken a while for him to recover. Though he felt like he was back to normal, on the off chance he’d missed something, pushing himself to travel to Lanling in a hurry would mean disaster might strike at a critical moment. He’d only wind up making things worse. Besides, he wasn’t the only one drained by the events of the past few days—Lan Wangji had been constantly on the move too. Deciding that Lan Wangji needed rest even if he didn’t, Wei Wuxian agreed.

“Okay. Let’s find a place to rest, first.”

Wei Wuxian could spend the night anywhere. He could sleep in mansions when he had the dough and sleep on tree roots when he didn’t. But with Lan Wangji presently accompanying him, there was no way he could imagine them lying under a tree or squeezed into some filthy little room. And so, the two walked for a long time until

they finally found an inn on the other end of Yunping City that was both reputable and extravagant.

The proprietress eagerly rushed out and practically dragged them inside. The inn was orderly and pristine, and guests filled almost the entire first floor. It was easy to see that the manager was very good at what she did. Most of the staff were women, from energetic broom-wielding girls in their teens to auntie chefs who were broad in the shoulders and waists. When they saw the latest guests were two young men, their eyes lit up. One of the girls, who was pouring water for a guest, was so caught up in staring at Lan Wangji that she didn't even notice when the spout of her teapot slanted off course. The boss lady barked at her staff a few times, ordering them to watch what they were doing, before personally taking Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji upstairs to view the rooms.

"How many rooms would the two gongzi like?" she asked as they walked.

Wei Wuxian tensed and his heart lurched upward at the question. Without losing his composure, he stole a glimpse at Lan Wangji.

Two months ago, there would've been no question. That was right after he'd returned, and he'd brought out every trick in his arsenal to try and disgust Lan Wangji, wanting to make a break for it as soon as possible. But Lan Wangji had figured him out and asked for one room ever since. Even when they did pay for multiple rooms, Wei Wuxian would still end up tangled in his bed, regardless.

But that wasn't all. Emboldened by the fact that no one knew who he was at the time, Wei Wuxian was fearless in making a fool of himself. The first night after they descended from the Cloud Recesses, he had eagerly burrowed into Lan Wangji's sheets ahead of him. The first thing Lan Wangji had seen when he entered his room was Wei Wuxian rolling around in his bed. He had stood there expressionless for a while, then gone to the other room he had booked.

As if Wei Wuxian would let him off so easily. He had chased after him, whining about sleeping together. After he crawled into bed with him, he threw one of the pillows out the window, adamant that Lan Wangji share with him. He had demanded to know why he was sleeping with his outer robes still on and then attempted to help him undress by force. Halfway through the night, he'd stuffed his icy feet under Lan Wangji's blanket; he had grabbed his hands and forcibly pressed them to his chest, exclaiming *"Listen to my heartbeat, Hanguang-jun!"* He had then proceeded to stare into his eyes, his gaze exuding innocence and tender love…until at last Lan Wangji had given him a gentle tap and turned him rigid, unable to move a single limb. Finally, all was tranquil again.

The past was too unbearable to recall. This was the first time Wei Wuxian had ever felt shocked by his own shamelessness.

By the third glance he gave him, Lan Wangji's eyes were still lowered. He said nothing, and his expression was indiscernible. Since he was slow to respond, Wei Wuxian's thoughts started going wild.

Lan Zhan's always asked for a single room in the past, so why isn't he saying anything today? If he switches it up and asks for two rooms this time, that would mean he really does mind… But if he asks for a single room as always, it doesn't mean he doesn't *mind. Maybe he'd only do it so it* looks *like he doesn't mind, so I won't mind either…*

Minding this, minding that, the proprietress resolutely answered her own question and resoundingly declared, "One room, right? One room is good enough! All my rooms can comfortably fit two people. The beds are big."

When Lan Wangji did not object to this arrangement after a moment, Wei Wuxian felt his suspended heart and feet temporarily touch solid ground again.

The proprietress pushed open a set of doors and ushered them inside. It was a spacious chamber indeed.

"Now then, do you want anything to eat? Our chef is excellent, I tell ya. I'll have the food sent up once it's ready."

"Yes, please, but not right now. Maybe later in the evening, around xu time?" Wei Wuxian replied.

The proprietress enthusiastically acknowledged his request and then left. Wei Wuxian was just about to close the door but then suddenly rushed out after her instead.

"Boss lady!"

"Does gongzi have any other demands?" the proprietress asked.

Wei Wuxian looked like he had made up his mind about something. "When delivering dinner later tonight, please bring some liquor as well…the stronger the better," he said in a low voice.

The proprietress smiled. "But of course!"

He returned to the room after making that request, looking as if nothing was the matter. When he shut the door and sat down by the table, Lan Wangji reached out and caught his wrist, pressing down to feel for his pulse. Though Wei Wuxian knew he was just checking on his condition, as those two long, slender, fair fingers traced up his wrist and started to slowly knead his pulse point, the fingers of his other hand, which rested under the table, began to curl slightly.

Lan Wangji spent nearly an hour examining his body before giving his verdict. "No major issues."

Wei Wuxian stretched lazily and smiled. "Thanks."

At the sight of Lan Wangji's serious face and furrowed brow, he asked, "Hanguang-jun, are you worried about Zewu-jun? Jin Guangyao still has some level of respect for Zewu-jun, I think. Besides, Zewu-jun's cultivation is higher than his, and he was already on his guard—he might not fall for his tricks. Let's crack the array in Guanyin Temple as fast as we can and aim to get back on our way tomorrow."

"Something is suspicious about this," Lan Wangji said.

"What?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Xiongzhang and Jin Guangyao have shared a close friendship for many years. Jin Guangyao is not one to kill rashly. He never makes an impulsive move."

"Yeah, that's my impression of him too," Wei Wuxian agreed. "It's not that Jin Guangyao isn't ruthless, but he doesn't offend anyone if he can help it."

"The incident at the Burial Mounds was both overdone and impetuous. It is unlike his usual style," Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian thought for a moment, then said, "If he had succeeded in his play at the Burial Mounds, then that would've been that. But if he had been exposed, the entire cultivation world would be forced to turn on him. That *was* a pretty big risk to take."

"Perhaps there are other hidden motives that require investigation," Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian sighed to himself. *Rather than figuring out all these hidden and not-hidden motives… I'm more curious about whether being a cut-sleeve is contractable through the sacrificial ritual!*

As he pondered and pondered, the exhaustion of the many past days surged within him. Wei Wuxian rubbed his temple.

"You should rest," Lan Wangji stated.

"All righty," Wei Wuxian replied and went to sit down on the bed. He kicked off his boots and lay down. "Hanguang-jun, you too…"

But he stopped when he realized an awkward problem.

There was only one bed in this room. If Lan Wangji was going to rest too, they would have to share. Although he'd lost count of how many times they'd shared a single bed in the time that had passed, such things seemed to have become more fraught ever

since Jiang Cheng had bawled him out at the ancestral hall in Lotus Pier. Never mind telling Lan Wangji to come lay with him—even deciding how many rooms to rent was enough to spark an internal dilemma.

"No need," Lan Wangji declined.

Wei Wuxian sat back up a little. "That won't do. The past few days have also been hard on you…"

He regretted speaking the moment he did so. If he finished that sentence, and Lan Wangji reflected on how troublesome this was and decided it'd be better to get two rooms after all, wouldn't things be even more awkward?

"I am fine." Lan Wangji then added, "You rest."

Wei Wuxian rubbed his chin. "…Oh. Then I'll just lay down for a bit. Wake me up at shen time, 'kay?"

Seeing how Lan Wangji had already closed his eyes to rest where he sat poised by the table, Wei Wuxian slowly lay down again.

He pillowed his head on his arms and stared at the ceiling for a while, then flipped over so his back was facing Lan Wangji. Some more time passed, and his eyes were still wide open. He couldn't relax enough to sleep, and restlessness began to rise within him.

Back when he was busy acting the madman and running wild, he had declared that he had to lay next to Lan Wangji before he could fall asleep, among other such things. Of course, it was all nonsense… But somehow, without his realizing it, that "nonsense" seemed to have become reality.

What should I do? Wei Wuxian thought. *Does this mean that from now on, I can't fall asleep in any bed that doesn't have Lan Zhan in it?!*

He tossed and turned for a long while before he was finally able to arduously close his eyes.

His hazy slumber lasted for an unknown length of time. By the time he woke, the light outside the window had already faded. Shen

time was long past, and you time had probably come and gone.

Wei Wuxian sat up at once. An odd sound came from behind him, and when he looked back, it was Lan Wangji closing a book.

"Lan Zhan, why didn't you wake me? Didn't I say to wake me up at shen time?"

"Replenish your spirit and regain your strength. There is no rush," Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian had slept most of the day away, and in all that time, Lan Wangji had probably only left the room to go downstairs and retrieve a book to read. Feeling a little guilty, Wei Wuxian hopped off the bed.

"Sorry about that. I slept way too long. Why don't you lay down for a bit too?"

"I am fine," Lan Wangji declined.

Someone knocked just then, and the proprietress called to them from outside the door. "Young masters, I've brought your dinners."

That was when Wei Wuxian learned it was already xu time. Lan Wangji opened the door. There was indeed a flagon and two small wine cups on the tray the proprietress carried.

As soon as she entered, she commented, "Oh my, seems like you've been sleeping until now?"

Wei Wuxian felt even guiltier and gave a dry laugh in response. The proprietress placed the tray onto the table.

"So where do the young masters hail from? You must certainly be exhausted if you've traveled all this way. You need to rest well. Wait till you're back on your feet to have fun, right?"

"We're from Gusu," Wei Wuxian answered without thinking.

"Is that right? No wonder!" the proprietress said. "I was gonna say. Such handsome characters as you two gongzi could've only been raised in a fair land like Jiangnan, the water country."

Lan Wangji acted like he hadn't heard her. Wei Wuxian laughed aloud.

"No competition. He's much more handsome than me."

"He's handsome in a smart way, you're handsome in a charming way," the proprietress stated. "It's not the same; you're both good-looking! Oh, that's right." Something seemed to have occurred to her. "If you two are here to see the sights, you can go check out the Guanyin Temple here in Yunping."

Wei Wuxian was just going to ask her about the Guanyin Temple, but she'd brought up the subject herself.

"We saw the Guanyin Temple during the day," he said. "It's rare to see a Guanyin Temple built in the middle of the city, isn't it?"

"Yeah," the proprietress agreed. "I was shocked, too, when I first saw it."

"Boss lady, when did you move to Yunping?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"About eight years ago now, I think."

"The Guanyin Temple's been here since then? Have you ever heard an explanation for why they built one inside the city?"

"I'm not too sure," the proprietress said. "Either way, the temple is popular, I tell ya. Whenever anything happens, everyone goes there to pray to Guanyin for safety. I go there myself to offer some incense when I've got nothing else going on."

"Why not just go to the cultivation clan stationed here?" Wei Wuxian casually asked.

He only remembered after he'd posed the question—wasn't the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng in charge of this area?

Unexpectedly, however, the proprietress pursed her lips. "Go to them? Who would dare?"

"Oh? Why's that?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Gongzi, you aren't from Yunping, so you don't know this. The Yunmeng region is under the jurisdiction of the Jiang Clan," the proprietress explained. "That clan's family head has such a violent temper… It's super scary. His subordinates say that when a prominent clan watches over such a large territory, they're saddled with nearly a hundred minor cases of little devils or yao causing mischief every day. If they had to respond to every single one, they'd never be able to keep up. If no one dies, then it's not the work of a malicious ghost or evil spirit, and if it's not the work of a malicious ghost or evil spirit, then we shouldn't bother them with such trifles." She was wholly indignant. "What nonsense. If someone *did* die, wouldn't it already be too late to seek their help?!"

In truth, there was a mutual, unspoken rule among the larger clans—if a situation didn't involve malicious ghosts or evil spirits, they wouldn't send anyone to check it out. Although the ideal of "appearing where there is chaos" had been so highly praised over the years, the only one who actually lived that maxim to the letter was the man next to him, Lan Wangji.

"Besides, Lotus Pier is much too scary a place," the proprietress continued. "Who'd dare go back?!"

Wei Wuxian moved his gaze away from Lan Wangji's quiet profile and blinked. "Lotus Pier is scary? Why would Lotus Pier be scary? Have you been there?"

"Not me, I haven't," the proprietress said. "But I know someone who went because their house was haunted. By his bad luck, when he arrived, Sect Leader Jiang was lashing someone with a glowing whip in the middle of their drilling grounds. It was *carnage*, I tell ya, those horrible screams reached the skies! One of the clan's servants told my friend in secret, with the best of intentions, that the Sect Leader had caught the wrong person again. He advised my friend that the Sect Leader had been in a bad mood lately and that deliberately putting himself in his sights would be asking for trouble. My friend was so scared that he dropped the gifts he had brought and fled, never daring to visit again."

Wei Wuxian had long known that Jiang Cheng had been arresting cultivators of the demonic path for years, all of whom were under suspicion of being reborn through possession—and that he'd bring them from all over back to Lotus Pier to torture and flog. It seemed the boss lady's friend had just so happened to run into him while he was in the process of taking out some of that anger. It wasn't hard to imagine the kind of hideous face Jiang Cheng might've been wearing at the time. No wonder ordinary folk would flee.

"And," the proprietress added, "I've also heard of another person who was frightened away."

"Frightened away by what?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Surely, this person couldn't also have coincidentally run into Jiang Cheng using his whip on someone. Just how diligent *was* Jiang Cheng in his arrests, and how frequently did he lash people?

"No, no," the proprietress said. "It was his bad luck too, I guess. His surname is Wen, and of course, Sect Leader Jiang's mortal enemy is also named Wen. He hates every person in the world who bears the name Wen, and he grits his teeth at the mere sight of them, clearly wanting to skin them alive. So of course, his face was not a pleasant sight…"

Wei Wuxian dropped his head and squeezed the bridge of his nose, not responding. Fortunately, his response wasn't necessary. Having rambled on this long in one breath, the proprietress was now content.

"I've talked too much and delayed your meal, haven't I? I'll go downstairs and leave the two of you alone. Let me know if you need anything else."

Wei Wuxian thanked her and walked her to the door, then turned to address Lan Wangji.

"Looks like we'll have to delve more than eight years into the past for what we want to investigate. Tomorrow, let's go find some locals who have deep roots here and ask them."

Lan Wangji inclined his head.

"But we might not get anything useful," Wei Wuxian added. "Eight years is a long time. Many things can be forgotten in such a span."

Just as he was about to pour the liquor, he hesitated, taking that split second to warn himself. *If he doesn't drink, then let it go. If he does, just ask a couple things. Don't do anything else—just figure out how exactly he feels. He won't remember anything once he sobers up, anyway… It won't affect anything.*

He swore this to himself before he steadily filled the wine cup and pushed it toward Lan Wangji with perfect nonchalance. He was already prepared for Lan Wangji to reject the drink—but maybe the other man had his own worries, for he picked up the cup without a single glance and tossed it back in one go.

Wei Wuxian brought his own cup to his lips. Whether intentionally or otherwise, he paid close attention to any movements from the other side of the table. But as he took a small sip, he immediately choked and coughed profusely.

What an honest soul, that boss lady. I told her to get me something as strong as possible, and she really did.

But the truth was, he could usually chug wine ten times stronger than this without batting an eye. The only reason he'd choked was because he was distracted. He wiped the liquor from his clothes. By the time he looked back up, Lan Wangji had already lived up to expectations and entered the sleep stage.

This time, he'd fallen asleep while still sitting upright. Aside from his tightly shut eyes and his slightly lowered head, he appeared no different from how he usually sat. Wei Wuxian waved his hand in front of him a couple times. No reaction whatsoever. He relaxed and reached out, gently hooking Lan Wangji's chin and tilting it up.

"The past few days have been killin' me," he said in a soft whisper. "Hanguang-jun, you've finally fallen into my clutches."

The sleeping Lan Wangji very obediently raised his head. When his eyes were open, their pale color and the coolness of his gaze made him look apathetic, stern, and inviolable. But when his eyes were closed, his contours softened considerably. Like a jade sculpture of a young and handsome figure, quiet, tranquil, and greatly appealing. The more Wei Wuxian watched him, the more he was captivated. Irresistibly, the hand hooked under Lan Wangji's chin pulled his face closer and closer; so close that it was crossing the line. A sudden burst of the cool, refreshing scent of sandalwood snapped him back to reality, and he cursed mentally as he quickly withdrew his hand. Lan Wangji's head drooped back down again.

Wei Wuxian's heart was pounding hard. He rolled around on the ground to calm himself, then leapt to his feet, chanted *"calm down"* to himself a few times, and finally slowly shuffled back to Lan Wangji. He sat properly for a while, waiting for the man to wake, but was eventually unable to restrain the urge to do mischief and poked his face. After poking it a couple times, he suddenly realized that he had never seen Lan Wangji smile before.

And so, he lifted the corners of Lan Wangji's lips with two fingers, wanting to see what his smiling face would look like. Suddenly, he felt a slight pain in one finger.

Lan Wangji had opened his eyes and was coldly glaring at him. He was biting Wei Wuxian's index finger.

"…Let go," Wei Wuxian demanded.

Lan Wangji held his head high and puffed out his chest, maintaining his cool, distant gaze. He leaned forward slightly, moving down Wei Wuxian's finger, taking it in from the first knuckle to the second. And then he bit down harder.

"Ow!" Wei Wuxian yelped.

Only then did Lan Wangji slacken his bite a little. Wei Wuxian used this chance to pull back his finger and scurried away. That bite had freaked him out—anything that bit reminded him of dogs, and the mere thought of dogs made his hair stand on end.

Before he could slip far enough away, however, Lan Wangji whipped out Bichen and stabbed the sitting mat hard, nailing a corner of Wei Wuxian's robe to the ground. They had changed clothes at Lotus Pier, so these robes were made of specialized fabric that was not so easily torn. Held back by the hem and unable to run too far, Wei Wuxian started running his mouth instead.

"Lan Zhan, look at yourself. You poked a hole in the mat and the floor of someone else's inn. We'll have to pay them back…"

Before he could finish, he felt someone grab his collar and drag him back. His back crashed solidly into someone's chest, and Lan Wangji's deep voice immediately echoed next to his ear.

"I will pay!"

He yanked Bichen out of the floor, looking like he planned to keep stabbing. Wei Wuxian quickly pounced to stop him.

"Stop! What *is* it with you? How are you like this after a single cup? Doing bad things like that?"

His tone was one of admonishment. Lan Wangji looked at him, then at his own hand, and then at that hole in the floor. As if a realization had suddenly hit him, he chucked the sword away at once. Bichen crashed to the ground with a muffled thud and skidded wildly across the floor. Wei Wuxian grabbed its scabbard. He flipped the scabbard into the air with a flick of his foot, and Bichen steadily and accurately returned to its sheath.

"Don't randomly throw such dangerous things," he reprimanded.

Lan Wangji sat even more upright at his lecture. He bowed his head, looking like he knew he'd done something wrong and was ready to be educated. It was always Lan Wangji who lectured Wei Wuxian in such a serious way. Only after having a drink did he get the chance to turn the tables on him.

With Bichen tucked against his elbow, Wei Wuxian folded his arms and tilted his head to watch him. He was suppressing his

laughter so hard he was shaking.

He really, *really* loved drunk Lan Wangji!

With him drunk, all Wei Wuxian's dilemmas from the past few days were swept away in an instant, as if all his wild and pent-up energy had finally found a chance to demonstrate its power. He circled the prim and poised Lan Wangji a couple times, then sat next to him in a whirl of movement. He showed him the torn corner of his robe.

"Look at what you did. You tore my clothes. You'll have to patch them for me later, 'kay?"

Lan Wangji nodded.

"Do you know how?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Lan Wangji shook his head.

"I knew it," Wei Wuxian said. "If you don't know how, learn. Either way, you have to patch up my clothes, got it?"

Seeing Lan Wangji nodding again, Wei Wuxian felt perfectly content. Before anyone could notice, he grabbed a seat cushion and covered the hole Bichen had created.

"I hid the hole for you. Now no one will discover your vandalism."

Lan Wangji took the small, exquisite money pouch from his robes and held it in front of Wei Wuxian.

"I will pay," he stated.

"I know you're rich, put it away… What're you doing?"

Lan Wangji stuffed the money pouch into Wei Wuxian's robes. He felt around the heavy bulge at his chest.

"For me?"

Once the pouch was stuffed inside, Lan Wangji helped adjust Wei Wuxian's collar and even gave his chest a pat, like he was afraid Wei Wuxian would lose his gift.

"Keep it well."

"You're really giving this to me?" Wei Wuxian asked. "So much money."

"Mn."

The impoverished Wei Wuxian was overwhelmed with gratitude. "Thank you! I'm rich!"

Unexpectedly, Lan Wangji's brow immediately furrowed, and he reached into Wei Wuxian's robes to snatch the money pouch back.

"No!"

Wei Wuxian was dumbfounded. He had just received that money, and now it was gone. "No, what?"

Lan Wangji looked gravely disappointed but remained restrained. He listlessly tucked the pouch back into his own robes and silently shook his head. He seemed a little sad.

"Didn't you just say you were giving that to me?" Wei Wuxian asked. "Why'd you take it back? Aren't you a man of your word?"

Lan Wangji turned around. Wei Wuxian grabbed his shoulders and turned him back.

"Look at me, don't run away," he coaxed. "Come, come, come, look at me."

And so Lan Wangji looked at him. They were both staring hard into each other's faces, a hair's breadth away, so close that he could even count Lan Wangji's long eyelashes. The cool and refreshing scent of sandalwood, the faint and indistinct fragrance of liquor—the two scents intertwined between their barely perceptible breaths.

They locked eyes for a long time, and Wei Wuxian's heart raced faster and faster until he could no longer keep up. He conceded defeat first and averted his gaze.

"Fine! You win," Wei Wuxian said. "Let's play a different game. Just like before, I'll ask questions and you answer them. No lying…"

He had only just uttered the word “play” when Lan Wangji abruptly agreed, “All right!”

He grabbed Wei Wuxian’s hand and stole out the door like a blast of wind, dashing down the stairs. Wei Wuxian’s mind was completely blank as he was dragged to the lobby. On the first floor, the proprietress and her staff were eating a meal at a long table. Lan Wangji spared them no glance, wholly absorbed in dragging Wei Wuxian out the door.

The proprietress rose to her feet. “What’s wrong? Gongzi, was the food not to your liking?”

Wei Wuxian spared some time in the flurry of action to respond, “It is! Especially that liquor; it really was potent…”

Before he could finish, Lan Wangji had already run out the door with him in tow.

— Part 2 —

EVEN WHEN THEY REACHED the main street, Lan Wangji showed no signs of stopping as he continued to speed along.

"Wheeere exactly are we going?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Lan Wangji did not respond. When they happened upon the courtyard of a house, he came to an abrupt stop. Wei Wuxian, finding this strange, was about to ask questions when Lan Wangji raised a finger and placed it in front of his own lips.

"Shh."

He reached out and caught Wei Wuxian around the waist, then pushed off on the tips of his feet. They both sailed airily onto the house's eaves and leaned on the tiles.

"Look," he whispered.

Wei Wuxian's curiosity was piqued by this enigmatic behavior, and his eyes traveled to where Lan Wangji was gazing. Inside the yard, he saw a chicken coop.

"…This is what you wanted me to see?" Wei Wuxian clarified.

"Let us go," Lan Wangji whispered.

"To do what?"

But Lan Wangji had already leapt from the eaves and landed in the center of the yard.

Had the master of the house been awake, he would've witnessed the moonlit arrival of a man dressed in white, with looks and poise that could shake the heavens. No doubt, he would have suspected him to be a banished immortal of the Nine Heavens who had descended to the mortal realm…except Lan Wangji's actions had none of the grace of a banished immortal as he sluggishly groped

around the yard. The more Wei Wuxian watched, the more this didn't feel right, so he jumped down the wall as well.

He tugged Lan Wangji's forehead ribbon. "What exactly are you doing?"

Lan Wangji pressed one hand to his forehead ribbon, while the other reached into the coop. The hens sleeping soundly inside were abruptly jolted from their slumber. They flapped their wings like mad, trying to flee. Lan Wangji's eyes sharpened, and he moved as fast as lightning to nab the fattest of the bunch.

Wei Wuxian was stunned.

The orange hen clucked and cawed wildly in Lan Wangji's grip, and he very solemnly placed it in Wei Wuxian's arms.

"Wha—?"

"Chicken," Lan Wangji said.

"I know it's a chicken. Why are you giving me a chicken?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Lan Wangji's face was pulled tense. "For you."

"For me… Okay."

By the look of things, he'd get mad again if he didn't take the chicken. Wei Wuxian accepted the offering.

"Lan Zhan, do you know what you're doing? This chicken has an owner. This is stealing."

Hanguang-jun was a distinguished cultivator of an immortal sect. If word got out that he stole chickens when he got drunk… Wei Wuxian didn't dare to imagine.

But at times like these, Lan Wangji only listened to what he wanted to hear, ignoring everything he didn't like and pretending he hadn't heard it. He remained buried in his work. The coop was a flurry of upset, clucking chickens and broken eggs. It was terrible to behold.

"I didn't tell you to do this, 'kay?" Wei Wuxian clarified.

They hopped over the wall, each holding a trembling, terrified hen. They walked for a while, Wei Wuxian still confused as to why Lan Wangji had suddenly stolen chickens—did he have a craving for poultry? Just then, he noticed a chicken feather caught in Lan Wangji's jet-black hair.

Pfft. Wei Wuxian couldn't take it anymore. But just as he was reaching out to help remove the feather, Lan Wangji unexpectedly leapt again and soared into a tree.

The tree stood in someone else's yard, but it was so lushly overgrown that its branches reached beyond the wall. Lan Wangji sat on one such branch.

Wei Wuxian looked up. "What's with you now?!"

Lan Wangji inclined his head. *"Shh."*

Upon being shushed, Wei Wuxian felt he was probably planning to do something similar to the chicken heist earlier. He saw Lan Wangji reach out and pluck something from the tip of the tree before hurling it to the ground. Wei Wuxian caught it with the hand that wasn't holding a hen. He looked at the object to find it was a big, round, barely ripe jujube.

Just as he'd thought. After stealing chickens, Lan Wangji had now progressed to stealing jujubes!

Wei Wuxian was no stranger to thievery. In fact, he'd loved pilfering all sorts of stuff when he was young. He'd even bring people with him and make a whole event out of it. But if his accomplice tonight was Lan Wangji…that was a frightening thought. Actually, no, he didn't count as an accomplice. Lan Wangji was clearly the ringleader here.

Something suddenly clicked.

When he took Lan Wangji to visit those once-familiar places back at Lotus Pier, he'd told him many fun stories from his childhood. Among those tales were many "glorious deeds" similar to tonight's capers. Could Lan Wangji have actually been listening, actually

remembered, and even wanted to seize this opportunity to experience the same things?

It seemed pretty likely!

The Lan Clan of Gusu was strict in their teachings. Ever since Lan Wangji was young, he'd been locked up at home to study and write lines. Every word he uttered and every action he took was according to the standard set by his elders. He had never done anything disgraceful or out of line. He *couldn't* do anything while sober, so he acted out while drunk.

Perched in the jujube tree, Lan Wangji was plucking jujubes as swiftly as the wind. It didn't take long for him to empty the branches. He packed them into his qiankun sleeves before jumping down, then opened his sleeves to show Wei Wuxian his spoils.

At the sight of those round jujubes, Wei Wuxian really didn't know what to say. It took a moment of processing before he praised him.

"…So big, so many, you're so amazing! Good job!"

Lan Wangji accepted his exaggerated praise with ease. He pulled Wei Wuxian's sleeve open and poured the stolen jujubes into it.

"Here. All for you."

Wei Wuxian played along. "Thanks."

But then Lan Wangji suddenly withdrew his hand, his sleeve billowing with the motion. A torrent of jujubes tumbled out and rolled all over the ground. Wei Wuxian hurriedly bent down to pick them up. He gathered some but couldn't carry them all.

"I have changed my mind," Lan Wangji stated.

He also snatched the chicken Wei Wuxian was holding under his left arm, now holding one chicken in each hand.

Wei Wuxian pulled at the tail of his forehead ribbon and dragged him back. "You were fine earlier. Why are you angry again?"

Lan Wangji swept a glance at him. “Do not pull.”

His tone did not sound happy. It even carried a hint of warning. Wei Wuxian unconsciously let go.

Lan Wangji lowered his head and shifted the two stunned chickens to his left hand, freeing his right hand to straighten his forehead ribbon and hair.

He never stopped me in the past, no matter how much I messed with his forehead ribbon, Wei Wuxian thought. *Is he actually angry today?*

He felt it extremely necessary to remedy the situation, so he said, pointing at the hen, “Forget the jujubes. Give that to me. Didn’t you say it was for me?”

Lan Wangji looked up and stared critically at him.

“Please, I really want it,” Wei Wuxian said sincerely. “Give it to me, won’t you?”

At his plea, Lan Wangji lowered his eyes. After a while, he handed the chicken back to him. Wei Wuxian accepted it, then took out a jujube and wiped it on the folds of his robes near his chest. He bit it in half with a crunch.

If Lan Zhan wants to play, he thought, *then play with him I will.*

“What are we gonna do next?”

They walked over to a wall. Lan Wangji looked left and right to make sure there was no one around before he drew Bichen from his waist. *Swoosh, swoosh, swoosh.* Streaks of dazzling blue light flashed across the wall, carving a row of large characters.



Wei Wuxian moved in for a closer look and saw the large words: *Lan Wangji was here.*

He was struck dumb.

Lan Wangji sheathed Bichen and admired his masterpiece. Even though he was drunk, his handwriting was still incomparably dignified and elegant. He nodded, looking extremely pleased. After a brief contemplative look at the wall, he lifted his hand once more. However, he wasn't writing this time but drawing. Flashes of his sword slashed across the wall, and a portrayal of two little kissing figures materialized.

At the sight of the rigorous "brushwork" and the sordid content, Wei Wuxian slapped his forehead.

Stealing things, wreaking havoc, scribbling and scrawling… He was certain, now. Lan Wangji really *was* repeating the things he had told him about before! There was absolutely no doubt about it. Even the content of his graffiti was pretty much the same!

He was caught between laughter and tears. *But I only did stuff like this when I was twelve or thirteen!*

The more Lan Wangji drew, the more enthusiasm he infused into his art. He finished with one wall and then moved to another to continue with his drawings. Watching as the content became ever stranger and more bizarre, Wei Wuxian felt bad for Bichen. At the same time, he thought, *I'll have to scribble over where Lan Wangji wrote his name on the wall, later. I can't let anyone discover he was the culprit. No, no, no—better wipe the whole wall clean.*

It took Wei Wuxian a great deal of effort to drag Lan Wangji back to the inn. He tossed the two chickens to the proprietress, saying they had picked them up on their walk. He then went up the stairs, closed the door, and turned around.

He hadn't gotten a good look while they were outside because of the darkness of the night, but now that they were in their room, the lamplight showed him the assortment of chicken feathers,

leaves, and plaster dust on Lan Wangji's clothes, face, and hair. Truly, what a loss of poise.

As Wei Wuxian helped pat it all off him, he remarked with a laugh, "So dirty!"

"Wash my face," Lan Wangji requested.

Wei Wuxian had washed his face for him the first time he was drunk, and Lan Wangji had seemed to particularly enjoy it. Sure enough, he now took the initiative to ask for it again. Wei Wuxian also meant to give him a wash, but given the state he was in, just washing his face alone was far from enough.

Thus, he asked, "Why don't I just give you a bath? What do you think?"

Lan Wangji's eyes widened slightly at this. Wei Wuxian carefully examined his expression.

"Yes or no?"

Lan Wangji immediately nodded. "Yes."

Lan Wangji really has a thing for cleanliness, Wei Wuxian thought. *I'll help draw him a bath and let him do the rest himself.*

The staff at the inn were all women. Wei Wuxian wouldn't call upon them to do tedious manual labor, so he instructed Lan Wangji to stay put in the room while he went downstairs to boil the water and carry it up one bucket at a time. After filling the bathing tub, he tested the water temperature before turning around to tell Lan Wangji to strip. When he looked back, however, he saw that Lan Wangji had already done so of his own initiative.

Although they had seen each other naked in the cold springs of the Cloud Recesses during their youth, they had both been innocent boys with no improper thoughts in their heads. When he had chanced upon Lan Wangji taking a bath before, he hadn't harbored any such thoughts either. Not to mention Lan Wangji's body had been half submerged in the water both times. So to suddenly see Hanguang-jun bare it all, in his full nude glory…it was,

needless to say, a huge shock to Wei Wuxian. For a moment, he didn't know if he should follow his heart and ogle to his heart's content or if he should pretend to be a gentleman and help Lan Wangji cover up.

Wei Wuxian was getting jittery. He unconsciously backed away, again and again—but even as he did so, Lan Wangji kept advancing on him. Now backed into a corner with nowhere to hide, Wei Wuxian had to just brace himself and watch as Lan Wangji expressionlessly approached him. His distinct Adam's apple, his fair complexion, and the smooth, beautiful contours of his muscles—these sights were forced on him, paraded right in front of his eyes. It was too much. Not daring to look, he unconsciously gulped and slightly averted his gaze. Surprisingly, his mouth felt parched.

Wei Wuxian gritted his teeth and was about to speak when Lan Wangji suddenly reached out and ripped off his sash.

He still looked serious, but his behavior was incredibly rough. Wei Wuxian jumped in surprise, not having expected him to make a move like that.

"Stop! Stop! I'm not bathing! I'm not gonna bathe! You go ahead."

Lan Wangji wrinkled his brow, and Wei Wuxian explained, "You go ahead first. I like, uh, big bathtubs. That one is a little too crowded for two."

Lan Wangji cast an indifferent glance at the bathtub and only reluctantly let it go when he confirmed that the tub was indeed not big enough. He felt his way to the tub in no particular hurry and slowly dipped into it, soaking himself in the hot water.

Wei Wuxian heaved a sigh of relief. "Take your time soaking. I'll go outside." He moved to step outside, get some fresh air and cool himself down, but then heard a splash.

He turned back to look.

"Why'd you come out?!"

"I am not bathing anymore," Lan Wangji stated with a cold expression.

"Why not?" Wei Wuxian asked. "You'd be so dirty if you don't!"

Lan Wangji looked sullen but didn't elaborate. Instead, he simply walked over to the screen to begin redressing himself in the same clothes he had stripped off. Wei Wuxian hurried back over, more or less guessing the issue at hand.

"You want me to bathe you?" he asked.

Lan Wangji lowered his eyes, neither admitting nor denying it.

Wei Wuxian's heart inexplicably softened at this sight of him. *I'll just wipe him a few times, at most. I won't do anything else.*

And so, he dragged Lan Wangji to the bathtub. "All right then, I'll bathe you. C'mere."

Only then did Lan Wangji allow himself to be dragged back to the water to soak anew. Wei Wuxian rolled up his sleeves and walked to the side of the wooden tub.

Lan Wangji's complexion was fair, and his long, shining jet-black hair floated gently on the water's surface. Amidst the trance-like swirl of rising steam, he was the very picture of a dashing immortal carved from winter ice, soaking in the springs of the immortals' abode. Wei Wuxian found himself thinking it was a pity he hadn't grabbed some flower petals or something to float in the water for a more picturesque view.

He scooped some water from the tub with the wooden ladle and poured a thin stream over Lan Wangji's head. Lan Wangji kept staring at him, unblinking. Worried that the water would get into his eyes and make him uncomfortable, Wei Wuxian said, "Close your eyes."

Lan Wangji ignored him and continued to stare intently. It was like he was afraid Wei Wuxian would run away if he so much as blinked. Wei Wuxian reached out in an attempt to close them for

him, and Lan Wangji evaded by submerging the lower half of his face into the water. He noisily blew out a string of bubbles.

Wei Wuxian laughed as he lightly pinched Lan Wangji's cheek. "Er-gege, how old are you?"

He picked up the soapbox and cloth towel and began to wash Lan Wangji's face. As he washed, his movements suddenly stalled.

Earlier, Lan Wangji had taken off both hair and forehead ribbons on his own, and his black hair had cascaded to cover his body. But as he helped Lan Wangji brush his dripping wet black hair behind his shoulders and traced the towel down his chest, the thirty-some discipline whip scars and the brand on his chest stood out with even more clarity.

Wei Wuxian moved the washing cloth around to Lan Wangji's back.

The whip marks extended from his back to his chest, shoulders, and arms, crawling over a huge expanse of smooth, fair skin. There were scars both shallow and deep, all of them hideous. They had effectively ruined his otherwise perfect body.

After watching in silence for a while, Wei Wuxian dabbed the towel in his hand into the water and washed the scars left by the discipline whip. His touch was extremely gentle, as if he couldn't bear to hurt Lan Wangji. However, these scars were all old. The time when they'd been most painful had long passed. And even if they were fresh wounds, given Lan Wangji's personality, he'd undoubtedly endure the pain in silence, showing no sign of weakness.

Wei Wuxian really wanted to take this chance to ask him what the deal was with those scars. The only people in the Lan Clan of Gusu qualified to use a discipline whip to punish Lan Wangji were Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren. Whether it was his elder brother, whom he was closer to than anyone else, or his uncle, who'd single-handedly raised him and considered him his pride and joy…what exactly had he done to force them to resort to such ruthless methods?

There was also the Wen Clan of Qishan brand that he could not recall Lan Wangji having received.

But though the questions were at the tip of his tongue, he held himself back. If Lan Wangji was unwilling to speak of the matter on his own, he would not ask. Although he would have no memory of it after sobering up, the fact that he dared to drink in front of Wei Wuxian meant that he trusted him. If Wei Wuxian took advantage of his intoxicated state to pry forth private matters and secrets that Lan Wangji did not want others to know, wouldn't that be extremely underhanded of him?

And so, despite getting Lan Wangji drunk, Wei Wuxian spent most of the night waffling and didn't manage to ask him a single thing. It wasn't that it slipped his mind. In fact, he hadn't forgotten for a moment that the reason he had given Lan Wangji alcohol was to ask him, *Hanguang-jun, how do you really see me?* But every time the words were about to leave his mouth, he found all kinds of excuses to back down—*There's no rush; I'll play along with him for now, wait until he's had enough fun before I ask*, or *I can't be so flippant about this, gotta be a little more serious. I'll ask again after we've sat down*…

But despite the many excuses that had him dragging his heels, the real reason was probably that he was afraid.

He was afraid of getting a different answer from the one he hoped to hear.

Lan Wangji had originally had his arms resting on the edge of the bathing tub, but now, he suddenly turned around. It was only then that Wei Wuxian realized his mind had begun to wander while he was washing him, leaving him rubbing the same spot for quite some time. The snow-white skin on Lan Wangji's back had been scrubbed red. It looked as if someone had beaten him. Wei Wuxian quickly stopped.

"Sorry, I was lost in thought. Does it hurt?"

Lan Wangji's back was stinging from Wei Wuxian's scrubbing, but even so, he did not say a word and merely shook his head.

Poor thing, Wei Wuxian thought, seeing him sitting so quietly and obediently in the bathing tub. He was about to hook a finger under his chin to tickle him, but Lan Wangji grabbed hold of his wrist before his hand reached him.

Wei Wuxian had already inflicted innumerable playful acts of the sort on Lan Wangji tonight and grown accustomed to him submissively accepting them. He had yet to realize what was happening when he was suddenly caught and stopped.

"Stop touching," Lan Wangji said, his voice deep.

There were still transparent water droplets on the contours of his handsome, refined face, even a few on his eyelashes. His expression seemed cold as ice, but his gaze was so hot it burned.

The alcohol he had ordered tonight was indeed too potent, it seemed. Wei Wuxian was feeling feverish.

"Stop?" he asked. "Why? Haven't you been letting me touch you for a long time?"

Lan Wangji pursed his lips tightly shut and said nothing. His grip on Wei Wuxian's wrist did not loosen. It would seem he was insistent on the matter.

Wei Wuxian's lips curled up at the corner, and he chuckled softly. "Considering the state you're in right now, what do you think you can do to me if I insist on touching you?"

Lan Wangji stared hard at him. A spark seemed to flash in his eyes.

This face, this expression, this gaze, this situation, and this person—they all made Wei Wuxian feel like his entire being was being consumed by a fire that incinerated all reason.

And suddenly, he lost his mind.

Throwing his previous reservations to the wind, he went for it. He plunged his other hand into the water and ruthlessly cupped a certain part of Lan Wangji.

"Hanguang-jun, don't try to pretend you don't like it when I touch you like this!" he panted.

As if he had been bitten by a venomous snake, or incensed by Wei Wuxian's action, Lan Wangji yanked at him hard. Wei Wuxian felt a wave of terrifying force assault him, and he was helplessly pulled to Lan Wangji's side.

Water splashed, and things spiraled out of control.

He didn't know who started it, but by the time Wei Wuxian was a little more clearheaded, he was already sitting on Lan Wangji's lap. It seemed he'd been embracing and kissing him in this position for a while. Their lips were inseparable. They were both soaking wet as they clung tightly to each other, but the only thing that remained in his mind was blazing passion and raging desire. That moment of clearheadedness was fleeting, barely lasting a second. Deep within him, a faint voice told him that it was wrong and inappropriate to be doing this kind of thing while Lan Wangji was drunk and unable to distinguish between right and wrong—but the voice was immediately snuffed out like smoke by another breathless flurry of kisses.

Both of Wei Wuxian's arms were wound around Lan Wangji's neck. He kissed him in every way he could manage until he could barely tear himself away. All those assurances he'd repeated to himself earlier—*"I'll only ask him a few questions," "I'll only help him wash," "I won't do anything else"*—were thrown to the back of his mind.



Then he suddenly yelped aloud and broke their kiss to spit out a curse. “Lan Zhan! Why did you bite me again? Are you a dog?!”

Lan Wangji’s answer to this untimely and minor complaint was to bite his chin. Wei Wuxian, who was more fearful of biting than anything else, frowned a little. To retaliate, he reached a hand down to grope the part of Lan Wangji that he had just teased.

Lan Wangji’s expression abruptly changed. Wei Wuxian heaved a few gasps of air as he pecked the corner of Lan Wangji’s mouth with his smiling lips.

“How’s that? Does it hurt? Are you angry yet?” He stripped off his completely soaked outer robes. “You know, Lan Zhan, I just love the way you look when you’re angry…”

His voice was full of fearless excitement.

Lan Wangji’s skin was so scalding it felt like he might burst into flames. One arm locked firmly around Wei Wuxian’s waist, he smacked the edge of the wooden tub with his free hand. The bathtub broke into pieces in an instant. The room became a complete mess and a tragic sight, all at once.

But they were much too preoccupied to care about such inconsequential things. Lan Wangji lifted Wei Wuxian and practically threw him on the bed. He had only just managed to push himself up on his elbows when Lan Wangji immediately pinned him flat again. It was a fierce, violent action, so very unlike the refined and upright Hanguang-jun who was extolled for his conduct and propriety.

The impact of Wei Wuxian’s back hitting the bed made him yelp in pain. Lan Wangji stalled for a moment, but Wei Wuxian simply murmured into his ear.

“I never would’ve guessed you were so ferocious in the sack…”

The earlobe by his lips was white, like gleaming jade. Wei Wuxian couldn’t help but take a small bite. He then took it into his mouth and sucked gently. Lan Wangji’s fingers tightened on Wei Wuxian’s shoulders, so abruptly and with such incredible strength

that Wei Wuxian hissed from the pain. He turned to look at his own shoulder, where five fresh, red finger marks had been left behind. Meanwhile, Lan Wangji was already reaching for Wei Wuxian's waist.

Wei Wuxian smacked his hand away and chuckled, intending to tease him. "So impatient?"

As he spoke, he pushed one knee between the legs of the man on top of him and pressed it against his crotch. Lan Wangji's eyes were faintly red, as if the blood vessels were bursting.

"It's not like I'm *not* stripping," Wei Wuxian said. "I can do it myself."

He readily ripped off his lower garment as promised. Now naked, he hugged Lan Wangji's sturdy shoulders and pulled him down, pressing him close against him.

They were both completely naked, pressed skin to skin. They caressed each other with perfect intimacy, twisting their necks as they kissed. Wei Wuxian seized the back of Lan Wangji's neck in a relentless grip, refusing to let them part even an inch. He nipped and pressed urgently against Lan Wangji's lips, swallowing his breath and saliva while his free hand wandered along the contours of his strong, beautiful muscles. His fingers met the uneven texture of the discipline whip's scars and gently stroked them.

Lan Wangji's actions grew even more forward and obscene. Those long, fair, slender fingers with their strong knuckles wandered all over Wei Wuxian's body before eventually greedily lingering about his waist and hips. Wei Wuxian was strummed relentlessly by that pair of hands, but the man playing him like a guqin did not possess a single trace of his usual elegance and coldness. For his part, Wei Wuxian did not sing out the pure, noble, and piercingly cold melody of the guqin, but brazen and unbridled moans.

At first, he enjoyed it. But after a while, he felt Lan Wangji begin to knead the delicate skin near the base of his thighs. It was a sensitive area, and Lan Wangji's hand was terrifyingly strong—it didn't take long for his pinching to make the skin there prickle and

hurt, making him weak and sending tingles through his body. He choked a little on his own breath and pulled his red and swollen lips away to gasp for air. Still having strength enough to tease, he feigned to move this utterly ungentlemanly hand away.

"Hanguang-jun, I can't believe you're this feral when your clothes are off. What a smudge on your reputation as an elegant… *Ah!*"

Lan Wangji pinched his nipple hard, and Wei Wuxian shrank back, trying to dodge away. Lan Wangji let loose an extremely dangerous-sounding noise.

"All right, okay, don't be like that," Wei Wuxian hurriedly relented. "I'll let you touch."

He guided Lan Wangji's hand down his body and added with a smile, "Touch me however you want."

In his euphoria, Wei Wuxian felt like he did actually possess a kind of natural lewdness when it came to this. But thinking about it and actually doing it were very different things. He had lived for two lives and still never felt the touch of anyone's hand but his own in that intimate region. When Lan Wangji's scalding hot palm finally wrapped around him, Wei Wuxian couldn't help but shudder, curling in on himself slightly.

However, the feeling of being held and stroked by another person's hand was far too good. In no time, Wei Wuxian stretched back out, unable to help himself. His arms wound their way behind Lan Wangji's shoulders, and he began to actively thrust into his hand.

Lan Wangji's movements quickened. Wei Wuxian's breath came in small gasps, and he felt so incredible that his eyelids began to droop. His fingers wanted to grasp something, but they could only scratch futilely at Lan Wangji's strong, bare back.

All of a sudden, it hit him that he shouldn't be the only one feeling good right now. And so, he slid his hand down Lan Wangji's body.

Wei Wuxian felt the hot, thick member suddenly swell a size bigger the second he touched it. It was as solid and hard as iron as it slapped into his palm. Just the feel of it made his face burn. He had never thought he'd ever touch another man like this. It was completely unimaginable. But the moment he remembered Lan Wangji was the one he was touching, he got so excited he could barely control his strength. He grabbed his member and stroked without rhythm, rubbing his bare thighs against it.

Lan Wangji's breaths turned harsh and heavy, and the veins of his member pulsed as it grew even more scalding hot in Wei Wuxian's hand. Their ears were filled with each other's increasingly uncontrollable panting, as well as Wei Wuxian's insuppressible moans.

He didn't know how long had passed, but Wei Wuxian felt all the blood and pleasure in him rush toward a particular area of his lower body. Awash in the electric sensation, a thin, cracking voice that was near a whimper escaped from his throat.

"Lan… Lan Zhan, you… Hold on, I…"

Before he could finish, that dangerous burst of pleasure exploded from his lower body.

Wei Wuxian's whines were cut short, and his mind went blank for a moment. When he returned to himself several minutes later, he blearily saw some faint evidence on Lan Wangji's taut abdominal muscles that made him realize he had reached his climax.

Lan Wangji came at almost the same time he did, covering Wei Wuxian's inner thighs with white release. As Wei Wuxian shifted in place, that unspeakable wetness slowly trickled down his thighs and past a particularly sensitive spot. He didn't even have to look to know that it was a mess down there; the stickiness between his legs made it obvious enough. It was a slightly uncomfortable sensation, but he felt an unparalleled sense of satisfaction above anything else.

Lan Wangji lay on top of Wei Wuxian, covering his body with his warmth as he buried his head in his chest.

Wei Wuxian was completely drained. He was weak from the tip of his fingers to the top of his head, and so lethargic that he didn't even want to curl his hands. It was a long time before the raging, feverish tide of passion ebbed and their breathing calmed.

Although he was being crushed by Lan Wangji's weight, his heart was incomparably tranquil and content. He lowered his head and dropped careful, delicate kisses on the top of Lan Wangji's head. In addition to the mild scent of sandalwood enveloping them, there was also a refreshing hint of soap post-bath. The sensual, musky smell was no longer as obvious.

He'd originally had questions for Lan Wangji, but at this moment, Wei Wuxian felt there was no longer any need to ask them. He would be the one to say it, and that would be enough.

"Lan Zhan… Are you listening?" Wei Wuxian asked in a hushed voice.

After a moment, Lan Wangji answered with a "Mn."

"I have something to tell you."

After a pause, Wei Wuxian continued in a soft, barely perceptible whisper. "Thank you, Lan Zhan. I…"

If he hadn't met Lan Wangji after he returned in this new life, Wei Wuxian did not know what he'd be like today. Regardless, he knew it would not be better than the way things were now.

However, Lan Wangji's entire body instantly stiffened when he heard him.

Wei Wuxian, still oblivious, was about to peck him with another kiss before he continued, but Lan Wangji suddenly shoved him away and sat up. Wei Wuxian was caught off guard, his back hitting the bed with a muffled thud as he was shoved to the other side.

He sat there, bewildered, with his eyes wide.

Lan Wangji's head was bowed. His chest heaved, and his breaths came short and quick.

Both of them sat facing each other in silence for a long time. Lan Wangji was the first to move.

His face was incredibly pale, but his eyes were clear and his expression entirely sober. He grabbed a piece of white clothing from the floor to cover Wei Wuxian before he went to find his own robes.

Wei Wuxian could not believe that had just happened.

It seemed like a nightmare had intruded on his tender, enchanting dream—one that upended a basin of cold water directly over his head and chilled him to the bone, from head to toe. It was also like he'd been slapped hard across his face, so hard that his ears rang, his heart pounded, and his world spun. He couldn't react for the longest time. It was with difficulty that he managed to open his mouth, but his voice was hoarse.

"…Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian called out to him, "are you sober?"

Lan Wangji had already finished dressing. He sat far away at the edge of the wooden bed and rubbed his hand over his forehead. He turned away from Wei Wuxian to survey the mess in the room.

After a while, he muttered, "…Mn."

Although Wei Wuxian didn't know exactly when he had sobered up, there was one thing he could be sure of. Since this was Lan Wangji's reaction now that he was clearheaded, it meant he'd been an unwilling participant in what had transpired earlier.

All of a sudden, it dawned on Wei Wuxian. He finally realized what he had done and just how vile it was.

He saw it all clearly now. All the assurances he'd given himself, like *"I'll only ask and won't do anything else,"* were simply self-deception.

Lan Wangji was usually utterly upright and self-disciplined, but when drunk, he would throw tantrums, hit people, and commit all sorts of outrageous acts—this was more than enough to prove that his intoxicated actions were not within his control. Wei Wuxian obviously knew this, and yet he'd still exploited a situation when Lan

Wangji was easily susceptible to manipulation. He deliberately seduced and stimulated him so that he could have his way with him.

No matter how much of an ascetic Lan Wangji might be, he was still a man, after all. There was no reason he wouldn't become aroused when Wei Wuxian deliberately tantalized him in such a brazen manner. What was more, Lan Wangji had been insulted by Jiang Cheng regarding this very matter the day before yesterday and was also still worried about his elder brother. At a time like this, Wei Wuxian just had to be reckless and make a mess of things…

After that one "mn," Lan Wangji did not utter another word. But Wei Wuxian was already thinking up a storm.

"Shame" was never a word he had learned to write in either lifetime, but now, he had a sudden and profound understanding of what it meant. His red, swollen lips still stung, and the stickiness on his lower abdomen and legs made him feel even more ashamed. He wanted so very badly to slam his head into the wall and die.

One of his worst theories had just been confirmed beyond a shadow of a doubt. Lan Wangji was indeed very nice to him, but…it was probably not the kind of nice he had been hoping for.

Unwilling to put Lan Wangji in an awkward spot, Wei Wuxian hurriedly grabbed his clothes and pants. As he began to dress himself, he patted one side of his head and said in a tone no different from his usual manner, "You've sobered up. My head's pretty much clear too."

Lan Wangji looked back at him. Wei Wuxian did not dare to guess what emotions were contained in his eyes. He grabbed his clothes with trembling arms and moved to put them on. After a moment of silence, he saw Lan Wangji reach out to him as if he wanted to help clean off the mess on his body.

"No need!" Wei Wuxian hurriedly exclaimed.

Lan Wangji's hand froze mid-reach. As expected, he aborted the motion.

Wei Wuxian breathed a sigh of relief and murmured, "No need for you to help. I can do it myself. You don't have to touch me."

A man like Lan Wangji would probably think he'd gotten his partner dirty by doing something like this, but Wei Wuxian was too ashamed to let him help. He offhandedly grabbed an inner robe and wiped himself all over before tossing it aside.

"Um… Lan Zhan, we both probably had too much to drink tonight. Sorry about that, eh."

Lan Wangji said nothing.

Wei Wuxian continued while he slipped on one boot. "But you don't need to feel too embarrassed; it's, uh, normal for men to do stuff like this once in a while. Don't…take it to heart."

Lan Wangji quietly looked at him. "Normal?"

His voice sounded extremely calm. Wei Wuxian did not dare to answer.

"Do not take it to heart?" Lan Wangji echoed again.

He'd initially thought he'd rather have Lan Wangji think him fickle and abominable than endure the awkwardness of knowing his feelings, which would surely make their friendship delicate going forward. But now, he regretted all the foolish things he had just blurted out without thinking.

"…Sorry," he muttered under his breath.

Lan Wangji jolted to his feet. Wei Wuxian suddenly panicked a little. Right at this time, the proprietress ran up the stairs and rapped on the door.

"Gongzi. Gongzi! Have you gone to bed?"

Lan Wangji averted his gaze.

Wei Wuxian hurriedly put on the other boot and answered, "Not yet! I mean, yes, we have. Wait a moment. I'll come after I put on some clothes."

Once Wei Wuxian was dressed, Lan Wangji walked over to open the door.

"What's the matter?" Wei Wuxian asked.

The boss lady stood in the corridor, wearing an apologetic smile.

"I'm terribly sorry to disturb your rest so late at night. Please don't take offense, but I had no choice. The guest in the suite below yours said that water was dripping into their room, and since the leak is likely coming from here, I came to check…" She poked her head into the room and was instantly shocked by the sight. "What the—?! *What happened?!*"

Wei Wuxian stroked his chin. "I'm the one who should feel embarrassed, ma'am. I'm sorry. I drank too much tonight and got crazy drunk. I wanted to take a bath, and then I struck the tub a couple times while I was in a merry mood, and it broke. I'm really sorry about that. I'll pay you back."

He had only just said that when it occurred to him: What the heck did he mean, saying he could pay for it? Lan Wangji was the one who'd borne all their expenses alone for the entirety of their journey, and he would still be the one to pay for this in the end.

Although the proprietress kept saying, *"It's all right, it's all right; no worries at all,"* her expression was incomparably pained. She walked into the room.

"Then how did the water leak… How is there even space to put a foot down in this room…?" She bent over to pick up a few cushions and was, once again, greatly shocked. *"Why is there a hole here?!"*

It was the hole that Lan Wangji had made by stabbing Bichen into the floor.

All Wei Wuxian could do was apologize nonstop, his hand pressed to his head of mussed hair. "Oops, that was my fault too. I was throwing a sword around for fun earlier, and…"

Before he could finish, Lan Wangji picked up the money pouch on the floor and set a silver ingot on the table. The proprietress's expression relaxed significantly, but she still couldn't help but say a few words of admonishment, one hand clutching at her chest.

"Oh, gongzi, don't take this the wrong way, but a sword is such a dangerous thing. How can you just throw one around for fun? It's no big deal if you jab a hole in the mat or the floor, but what if you hurt someone?"

"You're right, you're absolutely right, ma'am," Wei Wuxian said.

The proprietress took the money. "Then we'll leave it at that. It's so late now—get some rest. I'll get you both a new room tonight and repair this one tomorrow morning."

"Okay, thank you, sorry for the trouble… Oh, hold on! We'd like to have two rooms," Wei Wuxian said.

"Why two rooms now?" the proprietress asked in surprise.

Wei Wuxian didn't dare look at Lan Wangji as he mumbled an answer. "…I get crazy when I drink too much. You saw it too. I throw things around and play with swords and whatnot. I'm worried I might hurt someone."

"Oh, true!" said the proprietress.

She arranged for another room as promised and settled them in before she lifted the hem of her skirt and headed downstairs.

Wei Wuxian said his thanks and opened the door to his room. He looked back.

Lan Wangji was standing in the hallway, one hand holding Bichen and the other toying with his forehead ribbon. His head was bowed, and he was silent.

He'd wanted to hide himself in the other room immediately, but the sight of Lan Wangji bound his feet in place. After much deliberation, he carefully and sincerely said, "Lan Zhan, I'm sorry about what happened tonight."

After a moment of silence, Lan Wangji assured him in a low voice, "There is no need for you to say that word to me."

He fastened his forehead ribbon correctly and properly, and promptly reverted to the upright and self-possessed Hanguang-jun. With a slight nod of his head, he told Wei Wuxian, "Rest well. We will discuss Guanyin Temple and the trip to Lanling tomorrow."

Wei Wuxian cheered up a little at this—at least there were still things they could talk about tomorrow. He smiled.

"Mmm, you too. Rest well. We'll talk tomorrow."

He strode into the room, closed the door behind him, and leaned against the doorframe. When he heard Lan Wangji close his door, he immediately raised his hand and slapped himself across the face.

He sat down heavily on the wooden bed and buried his burning face in his hands, but even after waiting a while, the heat still hadn't subsided. His face burned just as keenly as he did on the inside. He picked up the teapot on the table and poured its contents over his head, splashing it into his face, but to no avail. He was covered in Lan Wangji's scent from head to toe.

Wei Wuxian knew that if he stayed here and kept thinking about how Lan Wangji was just a wall away from him—and of what they had been doing not long ago—he could forget about having a single moment of peace tonight. Sticking around here tonight was absolutely out of the question. He pushed open the wooden window and stepped onto the windowsill. Like a black cat, he lightly leapt out and landed soundlessly on the street outside the inn.

It was already late, and the streets were deserted. This was convenient for Wei Wuxian, who broke into a mad, lonely run.

He only came to a stop when he ran past the wall that Lan Wangji had scribbled on earlier while drunk. The wall was packed with a messy jumble of rabbits, pheasants, and little human figures. As he stared at them, Wei Wuxian recalled how engrossed Lan Wangji looked when he drew them and how he had pulled him over

to admire them afterward. The corners of his lips couldn't help but tug into a smile.

An unparalleled wave of regret washed over him.

If only he hadn't acted so willfully while drunk…

He could at least still pretend to be honorable and focused, then. He could still shamelessly snuggle into Lan Wangji's bed and squeeze in beside him, pretending to be contentedly asleep or falling into it. Unlike now, where he was unable to rest in peace even in the middle of the night, reduced instead to barreling out of the inn like a headless fly and darting around the streets to work out his feelings.

Wei Wuxian reached out and brushed a hand across two figures with puckered lips kissing on the wall, before trailing up to the words *"Lan Wangji was here."* The sentence needed to be cleaned away, but before Wei Wuxian did so, he traced the strokes of Lan Wangji's name with his fingertips.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

The more he traced them, the more he was loath to part.

All of a sudden, he heard scraping sounds. As it was the middle of the night, he circled warily around the corner of the wall for a look. To his surprise, he saw a figure in black scratching at the wall. The figure had a small file in hand and was concentrating on chipping away the traces of graffiti.

"…" Wei Wuxian was speechless.

Wen Ning turned around. His face was completely covered in white dust. "Gongzi, why are you here?"

"What are you doing?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Ah," Wen Ning said. "I saw Lan-gongzi wrote quite a lot on the wall. It will probably pose an inconvenience to the people living

here when they wake up and see it tomorrow, so I'm scraping it off…" After a pause, he asked out of curiosity, "Where's Lan-gongzi?"

Wei Wuxian dropped his head. "He headed off to bed. I came out for a stroll."

Sensing that his mood was off, Wen Ning stopped what he was doing. "Gongzi, did something happen?"

He took a few steps closer to Wei Wuxian, suddenly froze, and then backed up.

Wei Wuxian was confused. "What are you doing now?"

Wen Ning looked like he had gotten quite a fright. He hurriedly waved his hands. "No, no. Nothing!"

Wei Wuxian could tell at a glance that Wen Ning was embarrassed. He unconsciously swept a glance over himself and noticed several red finger marks on his wrists—Lan Wangji had left those behind when he grabbed him to pin him down on the bed. He touched his lips, which were still slightly red and swollen. Back when they were rolling around the bed in a delirious embrace, wanting so badly to merge into one, Lan Wangji had bitten him all over. His neck was probably also quite an interesting sight. If Wen Ning had any color in his face, he would probably be blushing fit to burst.

Wei Wuxian didn't know what he should say either. "You… *Sigh!*"

He sat down by the corner of the wall and sighed again. "I want a drink."

"I'll go buy something," Wen Ning immediately said.

"Come back!" Wei Wuxian called out. "What are you running for?"

Wen Ning returned. "To find liquor…"

"Oh, you…" Wei Wuxian said. "I was just talking, but you actually went for it. It's not like you're my servant."

"I know that," Wen Ning said.

"Besides," Wei Wuxian continued, "do you have money?"

"No…" Wen Ning answered.

"See?" Wei Wuxian exclaimed. "I knew it!"

"But Lan-gongzi has a lot…a lot of money…" Wen Ning said enviously. "…How nice."

"Ugh." Wei Wuxian knocked the back of his head against the wall a few times while sighing repeatedly. "Forget it. I'll never drink again."

Wen Ning was stunned. "Why?"

"Drinking ruins everything," Wei Wuxian said. "I'm gonna quit."

The corners of Wen Ning's lips twitched.

"What's with that look?" Wei Wuxian demanded. "You don't believe me?"

"No, no…" Wen Ning spoke haltingly. "But didn't jiejie fail to make you quit drinking, back then? Even after she exhausted all the methods she could think of…"

"Ha ha, ha ha." Wei Wuxian remembered it now. "Weren't those 'methods' just stabbing me every other day with her needles?"

He'd laughed enough. He suddenly asked, "Wen Ning, have you ever thought about what you're gonna do after this mess is over and done with?"

Wen Ning was momentarily stumped. "What I'm going to do…?"

Of the people Wen Ning had once been close to, not a single soul remained. Even people he once knew were few and far between. He'd never been good at making decisions. If he wasn't following Wen Qing, he was following Wei Wuxian. Aside from that, he probably had no idea where he should go, or where he *could* go.

Wei Wuxian still hoped he would find his own path to travel someday, but if he voiced that thought, it would only sound like he was trying to chase him off.

Then again…Wen Ning might have no idea of where to go, but was he not the same? When he was with Lan Wangji, he'd never even thought about it. He'd taken for granted that they would always continue as they were, without anything changing. But after tonight, the two of them might never be able to have that kind of relationship again.

While leaving Lan Wangji behind and freely roaming the world alone did not seem an impossible thing to consider…

…a voice deep inside Wei Wuxian told him the clear truth: It *was* impossible.

The nonsense he'd spouted back at Golden Carp Tower had really come true. The Wei Wuxian of today could *not* do without Lan Wangji.

He heaved a long sigh and said despairingly, "I need a drink."

The more he thought about it, the more depressed he felt. An anxiety with no room for release eventually transformed into a full-blown fury.

He leapt to his feet and cursed. "Damn it. Wen Ning, let's go!"

"Go where?" Wen Ning asked.

"To go cause trouble!" Wei Wuxian answered.



THE STORY CONCLUDES IN

Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation

VOLUME 5

Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation

MO DAO ZU SHI

Character & Name Guide

Characters

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

Note on the given name translations: Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible readings presented for your reference and should not be considered a definitive translation.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Wei Wuxian

BIRTH NAME: Wei Ying (魏婴 / Surname Wei, "Infant")

COURTESY NAME: Wei Wuxian (魏无羡 / Surname Wei, "Having no envy")

SOBRIQUET: Yiling Patriarch

WEAPON:

Sword: Suiban (随便 / "Whatever")

Hufu/Tiger Tally: Yin Tiger Tally (阴虎符)

INSTRUMENT:

Dizi (side-blown flute): Chenqing (陈情 / "To explain one's situation in detail." This is a reference to a line in a collection of poems, *Chu Ci* [楚辞], by famous poet Qu Yuan)

Unnamed dizi (side-blown flute)

In his previous life, Wei Wuxian was the feared Yiling Patriarch. He commanded an army of the living dead with his wicked flute Chenqing and laid waste to the cultivation world in an orgy of blood that eventually resulted in his death. Thirteen years later, a troubled

young man sacrifices his soul to resurrect Wei Wuxian in his own body, hoping the terrible Yiling Patriarch will enact revenge on his behalf. Awakening confused and disoriented in this new body, Wei Wuxian stumbles forth into his second chance at life. Now, he must piece together the mystery surrounding his return—and face the lingering consequences of his last life, which continue to dog him even beyond death.

Wei Wuxian is mischievous and highly intelligent. He seems physically incapable of keeping his mouth shut and also can't seem to stop himself from teasing people who catch his interest—with Lan Wangji being a perennial favorite target, even after thirteen years away from the land of the living. He has a soft spot for children and can often be found scolding junior disciples for endangering themselves during missions.

Lan Wangji

BIRTH NAME: Lan Zhan (蓝湛 / "Blue," "Clear" or "Deep")

COURTESY NAME: Lan Wangji (蓝忘机 / "Blue," "Free of worldly concerns")

SOBRIQUET: Hanguang-jun (含光君 / "Light-bringer," honorific "-jun")

WEAPON: Sword: Bichen (避尘 / "Shunning worldly affairs")

INSTRUMENT: Guqin (zither): Wangji (忘机 / "Free of worldly concerns")

Lan Wangji's perfection as a cultivator is matched by none. Shunning petty politics and social prejudices, he appears wherever there is chaos to quell it with his sword Bichen, and evildoers quake in fear at the sound of strumming guqin strings. His remarkable grace and beauty have won him renown far and wide, even though his perpetual frown makes him look like a widower.

Younger brother to the current Lan Sect leader, Lan Xichen, Lan Wangji is stern, reserved, highly principled, and an avid fan of

rabbits. While he was easily affected by teasing in his youth, he seems harder to perturb these days.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

Baoshan-sanren

COURTESY NAME: Baoshan-sanren (抱山散人 / "To embrace," "Mountain," "Scattered One")

A mysterious immortal cultivator. She lives the life of a hermit on a secluded mountain, far removed from the chaos and pain of the outside world. She frequently takes in orphaned children to be brought up as cultivators under her tutelage and has but a single rule for her students to follow: If they ever choose to leave the mountain, they will never be allowed to return. She was the teacher of Xiao Xingchen and Cangse-sanren.

Cangse-sanren

COURTESY NAME: Cangse-sanren (藏色散人 / "Hidden," "Colors," "Scattered One")

A famous cultivator of remarkable skill and beauty who studied under Baoshan-sanren. Upon leaving her teacher's secluded mountain, she fell in love with Wei Changze (魏长泽 / Surname Wei, "Long-Lasting" or "Large," "Benevolence" or "Lake"), a servant boy from the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng, and they ran away together. They eventually perished during a Night Hunt gone wrong, leaving behind their young son, Wei Wuxian.

Jiang Cheng

BIRTH NAME: Jiang Cheng (江澄 / "River," "Clear")

COURTESY NAME: Jiang Wanyin (江晚吟 / "River," "Night," "Recitation")

SOBRIQUET: Sandu Shengshou (三毒圣手 / "Three Poisons," a reference to the Buddhist three roots of suffering: greed, anger, and ignorance, "Sage Hand"

WEAPON:

Whip: Zidian (紫电 / "Purple," "Lightning")

Sword: Sandu (三毒 / "Three Poisons")

Jiang Cheng is the leader of the Jiang Sect and Jin Ling's maternal uncle. Known to be stern and unrelenting, he possesses a longstanding grudge against Wei Wuxian even after the latter's death. This is a far cry from the way things once were—Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian grew up together at Lotus Pier when the homeless and orphaned Wei Wuxian was taken in by Jiang Cheng's father, and were the closest of friends as well as martial siblings. However, after Wei Wuxian's rise as the Yiling Patriarch, their friendship ended alongside the many people who died at his hands…or so it seems.

Jiang Fengmian

COURTESY NAME: Jiang Fengmian (江枫眠 / "River," "Maple," "To sleep")

The former head of the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng, husband of Yu Ziyuan, and father of Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng. Jiang Fengmian is a mild-mannered man who prefers keeping the peace. He is rumored to have been in unrequited love with Wei Wuxian's mother, Cangse-sanren. He took in the orphaned Wei Wuxian and maintains a warm and fatherly relationship toward him. He treated Wei Wuxian with visibly more affection than his biological children, which further aggravated his already strained relationships with his wife and Jiang Cheng.

Jiang Yanli

BIRTH NAME: Jiang Yanli (江厌离 / "River," "To dislike separation")

WEAPON: Love, patience, soup

The eldest daughter of the Jiang Clan, older sister to Jiang Cheng, and older martial sister to Wei Wuxian. She is Jin Zixuan's wife and Jin Ling's mother, and is warmly remembered by Wei Wuxian as being unconditionally kind and caring—and also an amazing chef. Though she possessed weak cultivation and no talent for combat, Jiang Yanli's boundless compassion touched the lives of many and changed the course of the cultivation world more profoundly than any bloody war ever could.

Yu Ziyuan

BIRTH NAME: Yu Ziyuan (虞紫鸢 / "Apprehension" or "To worry," "Purple," "Kite [species of bird]")

SOBRIQUET: Zi Zhizhu (紫蜘蛛 / "Purple Spider")

WEAPON: Whip: Zidian (紫电 / "Purple," "Lightning")

The wife of Jiang Fengmian and mother of Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng. Originally from the Yu Clan of Meishan, she was a famous cultivator in her own right. She was a stern and unrelenting woman but loved her children deeply. That being said, she never warmed up to Wei Wuxian, the orphaned ward her husband brought home against her wishes. She was close with Madam Jin, and it was their lifelong friendship that prompted the arranged marriage of Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan.

Madam Yu has two personal maidservants who serve as her right and left hands when it comes to sect matters, named Jinzhu (金姝 / "Golden Bead") and Yinzhu (银姝 / "Silver Bead"). They are able to interpret their mistress's commands without a single word being spoken.

Jin Ling

BIRTH NAME: Jin Ling (金凌 / "Gold," "Tower aloft")

COURTESY NAME: Jin Rulan (金如兰 / “Gold,” “Like” or “As if,” “Orchid”)

WEAPON:

Sword: Suihua (岁华 / “Passage of time”), previously owned by Jin Zixuan

Fairy (spirit dog)

Unnamed bow

The young heir to the Jin Clan and son of Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli. Jin Ling grew up a lonely child, bullied by his peers and overly doted on by his caretakers out of pity. Though Jin Ling remains quite spoiled and unmanageable in temperament, he strongly dislikes being looked down upon and seeks to prove himself as a cultivator. He is often seen squabbling with his maternal uncle and sometimes-caretaker Jiang Cheng or hurling himself headlong into mortal peril alongside his loyal spirit dog Fairy.

Jin Guangshan

COURTESY NAME: Jin Guangshan (金光善 / “Gold,” “Light and glory,” “Kindness”)

The former Jin Sect head and father to Jin Zixuan, Jin Guangyao, Mo Xuanyu, and many, many more. He was a womanizer who would abandon his lovers just as quickly as he would any children born of his dalliances. Despite this ravenous appetite, he only sired one child (Jin Zixuan) with his lawful wife. Under his rule, the Jin Sect was loathed by the cultivation world for its shameless abuses, corruption, and excess. Thankfully, he eventually died of exhaustion during an orgy and was succeeded by Jin Guangyao.

Jin Guangyao

BIRTH NAME: Meng Yao (孟瑶 / “Eldest,” “Jade”)

COURTESY NAME: Jin Guangyao (金光瑶 / “Gold,” “Light and glory,” “Jade”)

SOBRIQUET: Lianfang-zun (敛芳尊 / “Hidden fragrance,” honorific “-zun”)

WEAPON: Softsword: Hensheng (恨生 / “To hate life/birth”)

INSTRUMENT: Unnamed guqin

The current Jin Sect leader. He is half siblings with Jin Zixuan, Mo Xuanyu, and countless other children born of Jin Guangshan’s wandering libido. He is also sworn brothers with Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue, and together, they are known as the Three Zun. He is particularly close to Lan Xichen and could easily be named the man’s most trusted companion. However, Jin Guangyao had a considerably more troubled relationship with Nie Mingjue before the man’s death, and they frequently had heated disagreements over their conflicting worldviews.

Jin Guangyao rose from humble circumstances and became not only the head of the Jin Sect but also the Cultivation Chief of the inter-sect alliance. His work as an undercover spy was instrumental in the success of the Sunshot Campaign. His skill at politicking and networking is matched by none, and through restructuring and reparations he was able to largely make up for the damage done to the Jin Sect’s reputation by his father’s rule.

Jin Zixuan

COURTESY NAME: Jin Zixuan (金子轩 / “Gold,” common male prefix “Son,” “Pavilion”)

WEAPON: Sword: Suihua (岁华 / “Passage of time”)

The Jin Clan heir and the only legitimate son of Jin Guangshan. He married Jiang Yanli and together they had a son, Jin Ling. He attended school at the Cloud Recesses in his youth and was classmates with Wei Wuxian, Jiang Cheng, and Nie Huaisang. Due to

his status, his natural skill, and his good looks, Jin Zixuan was generally rather prideful and arrogant, and was disliked by his peers.

He was initially resentful of his betrothal to Jiang Yanli, as it was arranged by his mother without his input or consent. However, he eventually began to regret his rude behavior and developed real feelings for her. Jiang Yanli seemed charmed by his earnest and extremely inept attempts to woo her, and the result was a brief but happy marriage.

Jin Zixun

COURTESY NAME: Jin Zixun (金子勋 / "Gold," common male prefix "Son," "Meritorious deed")

Jin Zixuan's younger paternal cousin. Like his cousin, he is arrogant and prideful regarding his appearance and skills, but unlike his cousin, these feelings do not have much basis in reality. Jin Zixun's cultivation level is unremarkable, and this coupled with his inability to keep a cool head often makes him a liability in tense situations.

Madam Jin

The lawful wife of Jin Guangshan and mother of Jin Zixuan. While her proper name is never revealed, her forceful personality is not so easily forgotten. She was close with Madam Yu, and it was their lifelong friendship that prompted the arranged marriage of Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan. She despises her husband's constant philandering (as well as any reminders of it in the form of illegitimate children), and although he fears her wrath, it does not stop him from continuing apace. She is equally unamused by her son's attitude problems and not afraid to reprimand him in public should the need arise.

Lan Jingyi

COURTESY NAME: Lan Jingyi (蓝景仪 / “Blue,” “Scenery,” “Bearing” or “Appearance”)

WEAPON: Unnamed sword

A junior disciple in the Lan Sect. He is close friends with Lan Sizhui and appears to have a special kind of admiration for Lan Wangji. Although he was raised in such a strict sect, Lan Jingyi is distinctly un-Lan-like in his mannerisms, being loud, bluntly honest, and easily worked up into a tizzy. That being said, like any Lan, he is still very quick to spot and accuse instances of rule-breaking on the Cloud Recesses’ premises.

Lan Qiren

COURTESY NAME: Lan Qiren (蓝启仁 / “Blue,” “Open” or “Awaken,” “Benevolence”)

WEAPON: Long lectures, closed-book exams

A Lan Clan elder and the paternal uncle of Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji. He is well known across the cultivation world as an exemplary (and extremely strict) teacher who consistently produces equally exemplary students. He loves his nephews deeply and is clearly extremely proud of their accomplishments and skill as cultivators and gentlemen both. However, he does not exclude them from the prescribed clan punishments on the rare occasion that such things are warranted. Lan Qiren saw how his older brother Qingheng-jun was ruined by love and is desperate to keep his nephews from making the same mistakes as their father.

Lan Sizhui

BIRTH NAME: Lan Yuan (蓝愿 / “Blue,” “Wish”)

COURTESY NAME: Lan Sizhui (蓝思追 / “Blue,” “To remember and long for”)

WEAPON: Unnamed sword

INSTRUMENT: Unnamed guqin

A junior disciple in the Lan Sect. He is close friends with Lan Jingyi and appears to have a special kind of admiration for Lan Wangji. Lan Sizhui is poised and quite mature for his age and is a natural leader of his peers when the juniors are sent out on investigations. Although raised in such a strict sect, Lan Sizhui retains an air of warmth about him. He is kind, intuitive, and willing to see beyond surface appearances.

Unbeknownst to most, he is the last surviving member of the Wen Clan as the child of Wen Qing and Wen Ning's cousin (paternal side). Lan Sizhui does not remember his childhood years. He was raised by Lan Wangji after the first Siege of the Burial Mounds, who changed the writing of "Yuan" from 苑 / "garden" to 愿 / "wish" and gave him the Lan clan name, as well as the courtesy name "Sizhui."

Lan Xichen

BIRTH NAME: Lan Huan (蓝涣 / "Blue," "Melt" or "Dissipate")

COURTESY NAME: Lan Xichen (蓝曦臣 / "Blue," "Sunlight," "Minister" or "Subject")

SOBRIQUET: Zewu-jun (泽芜 / "Moss-shaded pool," honorific "-jun")

WEAPON: Sword: Shuoyue (朔月 / "New moon")

INSTRUMENT: Xiao (end-blown flute): Liebing (裂冰 / "Cracked," "Ice")

Unnamed guqin

The current Lan Sect head and Lan Wangji's elder brother. He is also sworn brothers with Jin Guangyao and Nie Mingjue, and together they are known as the Three Zun.

Lan Xichen possesses a warm and gentle personality and can easily get along with anyone and everyone. He possesses the unique and curious ability to understand his reticent little brother at a

glance. He is as calm and undisturbed as the shaded pool from which he takes his sobriquet and will lend an ear to anyone who approaches, whatever their social standing.

Mianmian

SOBRIQUET: Mianmian (绵绵 / "Continuous")

A young female cultivator from a minor clan. She is harassed by the lecherous Wen Chao when imprisoned at his clan's training facilities, and this provokes the furious jealousy of Wang Lingjiao. As Wei Wuxian never wheedled her real name out of her during their brief meeting, she is known to him by her nickname only. He used this nickname to tease her flirtatiously by referencing the lady lead of a romantic folksong from the Han dynasty. The verse in question used is *Mianmian si yuandao*, "Unendingly do I long for [my husband]."

Mo Xuanyu

COURTESY NAME: Mo Xuanyu (莫玄羽 / "Nothing" or "There is none who," "Mysterious" or "Black," "Feathers")

The young man who offered up his own body to bring Wei Wuxian back into the land of the living at a most horrible price: the obliteration of his own soul. He is one of the many illegitimate sons of Jin Guangshan. After he was expelled from the Jin Sect, the humiliation took a dreadful toll on his mind. He endured years of relentless abuse by the Mo household and eventually turned to demonic cultivation to exact revenge on those who tormented him. With his soul destroyed, Mo Xuanyu himself is now but a memory, and Wei Wuxian inhabits his body.

Nie Huaisang

COURTESY NAME: Nie Huaisang (聂怀桑 / “Whisper,” “Cherish,” “Mulberry”)

SOBRIQUET: Head-Shaker (一问三不知 / “One Question, Three Don’t-Knows”)

WEAPON:

Unnamed saber (ostensibly)

Crying (actually)

The current Nie Sect head and Nie Mingjue’s younger half brother. When they were young, he attended school at the Cloud Recesses with Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng. Nie Huaisang is a dilettante dandy who possesses a passionate love of fashion and the arts, but unfortunately possesses no such innate genius for politics or management. He is frequently seen looking stricken and panicked, and largely relies on the compassion and assistance of his older brother’s sworn brothers (Lan Xichen and Jin Guangyao) to keep the Nie Sect struggling along.

Nie Mingjue

COURTESY NAME: Nie Mingjue (聂明玦 / “Whisper,” “Bright” or “Righteousness,” “Jade ring”)

SOBRIQUET: Chifeng-zun (赤锋尊 / “Crimson Blade,” honorific “-zun”)

WEAPON: Saber: Baxia (霸下 / “To be ruled by force,” also the name of one of the mythical Dragon King’s nine sons.)

The former Nie Sect head and Nie Huaisang’s older half brother. He is also sworn brothers with Lan Xichen and Jin Guangyao, and together they are known as the Three Zun. Nie Mingjue was a fierce man who was quick to use violence as a solution. He was unable to tolerate injustice or underhanded behavior, and was fearless in calling out even those in the highest

seats of power. Unfortunately, his temperament eventually got the better of him, and he died at a young age from a qi deviation.

Ouyang Zizhen

BIRTH NAME: Ouyang Zizhen (欧阳子真 / Surname Ouyang, common male prefix "Son," "Genuine," "Truth")

WEAPON: A sentimental heart

One of the junior disciples who was rescued by Wei Wuxian as they found themselves lost in Yi City's fog. He is described by Wei Wuxian as having a sentimental outlook on the world. Ouyang Zizhen does not forget the kind deeds others have done for him, and he will not hesitate to stand up to defend a friend even in the face of an army.

Sect Leader Ouyang

NAME: Sect Leader Ouyang (欧阳宗主 / Surname Ouyang, "sect leader")

The leader of the Ouyang Sect and head of the Ouyang Clan, based in Baling. He is Ouyang Zizhen's father.

Qin Su

BIRTH NAME: Qin Su (秦愫 / Surname Qin, "Sincerity")

Jin Guangyao's wife. Despite her high social status, she pushed to be allowed to marry for love and got her way. She is devoted to her husband, Jin Guangyao, with whom she had one child, Jin Rusong (金如松 / "Gold," "Like/as if," "Pine tree"), who died tragically at a young age. Jin Rusong's name uses the same character for "pine" that is in the poem from which the Cloud Recesses takes its name, in honor of the close friendship between Jin Guangyao and Lan Xichen.

Bicao

NAME: Bicao (碧草 / “Green grass”) [no family name given]

The ex-handmaid of the late Madam Qin of the Qin Clan of Laoling. She was deeply trusted by her late madam and watched Qin Su grow up.

Sect Leader Yao

NAME: Sect Leader Yao (姚宗主 / Surname Yao, “sect leader”)

The leader of the Yao Sect and head of the Yao Clan. He is very quick to speak in public and does so at great length and with considerable pretension.

Sisi

NAME: Sisi (思思 / “Pining” or “Longing”) [no family name given]

An ex-prostitute with a heavily scarred face. The sole surviving witness to a shocking incident, she was secretly held under house arrest for over a decade. Thanks to the assistance of a mysterious benefactor, she recently escaped her imprisonment and is now determined to tell the world the truth of what she saw that fateful day.

Su She

BIRTH NAME: Su She (苏涉 / “Tassel” or “Revival,” “Experience” or “Involve”)

COURTESY NAME: Su Minshan (苏悯善 / “Tassel” or “Revival,” “Compassion” or “Kindness”)

WEAPON: Sword: Nanping (难平 / “Difficult to quell”)

INSTRUMENT: Unnamed guqin

The leader of the Su Sect of Moling and head of the Su Clan. Originally a disciple of the Lan Sect, Su She eventually left to form his own sect. Insecure about his abilities as a cultivator, he has a tendency to copy Lan techniques, which has led to bad blood between the sects.

Wen Ning

BIRTH NAME: Wen Ning (温宁 / "Mild" or "Warm," "Peaceful")

COURTESY NAME: Wen Qionglin (温琼林 / "Mild" or "Warm," "Beautiful" or "Fine jade," "Forest")

SOBRIQUET: Ghost General (鬼将军)

WEAPON: Fists, feet, and metal chains

A fierce corpse known as the Ghost General. One of the Yiling Patriarch's finest creations, Wen Ning retains his mind and personality. Coupled with the strength to crush steel to dust with his bare fists, it is no wonder that he was once Wei Wuxian's right-hand man.

Wen Ning wasn't always so powerful, nor always so dead. In life, he served under the Wen Clan as the leader of a minor squadron. His compassion and meekness were always at odds with the orders passed down from on high, and he also suffered from a minor stutter. Despite the lack of respect from his peers, he maintained his position in the Wen Clan due to family ties. He is the beloved younger brother of the Wen Clan's most famous doctor, Wen Qing, and the son of Wen Ruohan's cousin.

Wen Qing

COURTESY NAME: Wen Qing (温情 / "Mild" or "Warm," "Sentiment"; 温情 taken as a single word means "Tenderness")

WEAPON: A steady hand and an endless supply of acupuncture needles

A famous and highly decorated doctor and a member of the Wen Clan. She has a no-nonsense personality and a decided lack of bedside manner. Although she can come across as arrogant, no one in the cultivation world could deny that her abilities are truly exceptional. Wen Qing is the daughter of Wen Ruohan's maternal cousin and is a personal favorite of the mad tyrant himself. While she does not share her relative's taste for cruelty, she doesn't consider it something she needs to personally concern herself with—after all, her prime directive is to ensure the survival of her beloved younger brother, Wen Ning, at all costs.

Wen Ruohan

COURTESY NAME: Wen Ruohan (温若寒 / "Mild" or "Warm," "As though," "Cold" or "Tremble")

The leader of the Wen Clan of Qishan and an immensely powerful cultivator. He is cruel and power-hungry, and will stop at nothing to ensure that the Wen Clan crushes all other clans beneath its heel. He has an extensive collection of torture devices and does not hesitate to use them to toy with his victims until death releases them.

Fairy

WEAPON: Claws, jaws, and the only brain in the room (usually)

INSTRUMENT: Woof!

Jin Ling's loyal spirit dog. As a spirit dog, Fairy possesses intelligence of a level above the average canine and can detect supernatural beings. Regarding the pup's name, "Fairy" could refer to the Chinese *xianzi* (仙子), a female celestial being, but it is also a common way to describe a woman with ethereal, otherworldly beauty. That being said, Fairy's gender is never specified in the text.

Little Apple

WEAPON: Hooves, teeth, and raw fury

A spotted donkey that Wei Wuxian stole from Mo Manor as he made his escape after the ghost arm incident. Little Apple is imperious, hard to please, and very temperamental; however, it possesses a strong sense of justice and a heart brave enough to put even the most renown cultivators to shame. It also really loves apples. Little Apple's gender is never specified in the text.

Locations

HUBEI

Burial Mounds (乱葬岗)

A foreboding mountainous ridge located near Yiling. It is said to be the spot where an ancient and most terrible battle was waged. It is heavily ravaged by resentful energy and packed to the brim with walking corpses and vengeful ghosts. It has proven to be extremely resistant to any attempts at purification from top cultivation sects, and as such it was sealed off with magical barriers and written off as a lost cause. That is, until the dreaded Yiling Patriarch claimed it as his base of operations.

Lotus Pier (莲花坞)

The residence of the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng, located on the shores of a vast lake rich with blooming lotuses. The picturesque scenery is a perfect setting for a myriad of outdoor activities, such as boating, kite-flying, and playfully roughhousing with one's martial siblings.

Lotus Pier is always bustling with cultivators and common folk alike, which is in stark contrast to other sects. Merchants line the piers to hawk food and wares, and local children scamper about to gawk in awe as the disciples of the Jiang Sect do their daily training.

Yiling (夷陵)

An area located near Yunmeng. While Yiling itself is bustling with life, it is most infamous for its proximity to the Burial Mounds.

Yunmeng (云梦)

A county in the Hubei area. Its many lakes and waterways make it a prime juncture point for trade.

Yunping(云萍)

A city in the Hubei area, near Yunmeng. Located on the shores of a river that cuts through the region, it sees a considerable amount of trade and tourism. It also boasts a most peculiar feature: a temple located in the heart of the city that is dedicated to the beloved goddess Guanyin.

JIANGNAN

Cloud Recesses (云深不知处)

The residence of the Lan Clan of Gusu, located on a remote mountaintop. The Cloud Recesses is a tranquil place constantly shrouded in mist. Beside the entrance there looms the Wall of Discipline, carved with the three thousand (later four thousand) rules of the Lan Clan.

The Cloud Recesses is home to the Library Pavilion where many rare and ancient texts are housed, the Tranquility Room where Lan Wangji resides, and the Orchid Room where Lan Qiren hosts lectures. There is also the Nether Room, a tower in which spirit-summoning rituals are performed, as well as a cold spring for bathing. On the back of the mountain is a secluded meadow where Lan Wangji keeps his pet rabbits.

The Cloud Recesses' name translates more literally to "Somewhere Hidden in Clouds" (云深不知处) and is a reference to a line in the poem "Failing to Find the Hermit," by Jia Dao:

I asked the young disciple beneath the pine;

"My master is gone to pick herbs," he answered.

"Though within this mountain he is,

The recesses of clouds hide his trail."

Gusu (姑苏)

A city in the Jiangnan region. Jiangnan is famous for its rich, fertile land and its abundant agricultural goods. Its hazy, drizzling weather and the soft sweet dialect make it a popular setting in Chinese romance literature.

HEBEI

Qinghe (清河)

A county in the Hebei region. Qinghe is the home territory of the Nie Clan and is where their residence is located.

Impure Realm (不净世)

The residence of the Nie Clan of Qinghe. Its name may be a reference to Patikulamanasikara (in Chinese, written as 不淨觀 / Impure View), a set of Buddhist sutras meant to help overcome mortal desires. It thus serves both as a goal for the Nie Clan to aspire to and a reminder of their background as butchers.

SHAANXI

Qishan (岐山)

A county in the Shaanxi region. Qishan is the home territory of the Wen Clan and is where their residence is located.

Nightless City (不夜天城)

The residence of the Wen Clan of Qishan. Its name is derived from the fact that the expansive complex is vast enough to be comparable to the size of a city, as well as the brazen declaration of

the Wen Clan that the sun never sets upon their domain—since it is their clan crest. The Scorching Sun Palace is the seat of Wen Ruohan's power, and the Inferno Palace is where he stores and demonstrates his vast collection of torture devices on unlucky guests.

SHANDONG

Lanling (兰陵)

A county in the Shandong region.

Golden Carp Tower (金麟台)

The residence of the Jin Clan of Lanling, located at the heart of the city of Lanling. The main road to the tower is only opened when events are being hosted, and this grand avenue is lavishly decorated with murals and statuary. Upon reaching the tower base, travelers must scale the numerous levels of steep staircases that lead to the tower proper. These staircases are a reference to the legend from which Golden Carp Tower derives its name—it is said that if an ordinary carp is able to leap to the top of a waterfall, it can turn into a glorious dragon.

Once the arduous journey to the top is complete, one will find themselves overlooking the city of Lanling from on high and vast gardens of the Jin Clan of Lanling's signature flower: the cultivar peony, Sparks Amidst Snow. The Jin Sect's wealth and influence, as well as current leader Jin Guangyao's position as Cultivation Chief, sees Golden Carp Tower hosting frequent symposiums and banquets with VIP guests from the cultivation world's most powerful sects.

MISCELLANEOUS

Dongying (东瀛)

The name used for the country of Japan in ancient China.

Qiongqi Path (穷奇道)

An old road running through a mountain valley. It was previously a tourist attraction that boasted murals depicting the brave deeds of the Wen Clan's founder, Wen Mao. After the Sunshot Campaign's conclusion, the area was reassigned to the Jin Clan of Lanling, who wasted no time in removing the Wen murals to rebrand it as their own.

Name Guide

Courtesy Names

A courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. Traditionally, this was at the age of twenty during one's crowning ceremony, but it can also be presented when an elder or teacher deems the recipient worthy. Generally a male-only tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting a courtesy name after marriage. Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class.

It was considered disrespectful for one's peers of the same generation to address someone by their birth name, especially in formal or written communication. Use of one's birth name was reserved for only elders, close friends, and spouses.

This practice is no longer used in modern China but is commonly seen in wuxia and xianxia media. As such, many characters have more than one name. Its implementation in novels is irregular and is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling. For example, in *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, characters as young as fifteen years of age are referred to only by their courtesy names, while traditionally they would not have been permitted to use them until the age of twenty.

Sobriquet

The term used in this translation for *hao* (號). Hao can also be translated as "art name." These names are generally chosen by an individual for themselves, but they can also be bestowed upon them in light of their accomplishments or traits. They were often used as pen names or respectful titles for scholars, government officials, or martial heroes. They could be derived from a number of possible subjects, including their place of birth, a poetic quote, a feat that the person in question was famous for, and more.

Names, Honorifics, & Titles

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

XIAO-: A diminutive meaning "little." Always a prefix.

LAO-: A diminutive meaning "old."

-ER: A word for "son" or "child." Added to a name, it expresses affection. Similar to calling someone "Little" or "Sonny."

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

EXAMPLE: A-Qing, A-Yuan, A-Xian (For Wei Wuxian)

Doubling a syllable of a person's name can be a nickname, and has childish or cutesy connotations.

EXAMPLE: Xianxian (for Wei Wuxian, referring to himself).

Family

BOMU: Aunt (non-biological, wife of father's elder brother).

DI: Younger brother or younger male friend. Can be used alone or as an honorific.

DIDI: Younger brother or a younger male friend. Casual.

XIAO-DI: Does not mean "little brother", and instead refers to one's lackey or subordinate, someone a leader took under their wings.

GE: Older brother or older male friend.

GEGE: Older brother or an older male friend. Casual and has a cutesier feel than "ge," so it can be used in a flirtatious manner.

JIE: Older sister or older female friend. Can be used alone or as an honorific.

JIEJIE: Older sister or an unrelated older female friend. Casual.

JIUJIU: Uncle (maternal, biological).

MEI: Younger sister or younger female friend. Can be used alone or as an honorific.

MEIMEI: Younger sister or an unrelated younger female friend. Casual.

SHUFU: Uncle (paternal, biological) Formal address for one's father's younger brother.

SHUSHU: An affectionate version of "Shufu."

XIAO-SHU OR XIAO-SHUSHU: Little (paternal) uncle; affectionate.

XIONG: Older brother. Generally used as an honorific. Formal, but also used informally between male friends of equal status.

XIONGZHANG: Eldest brother. Very formal, blood related-only.

XIANSHENG: Historically "teacher," but modern usage is "Mister." Also an affectionate way for wives to refer to their husband.

If multiple relatives in the same category are present (multiple older brothers, for example), everyone is assigned a number in order of birthdate, starting with the eldest as number one, the second oldest as number two, etc. These numbers are then used to differentiate one person from another. This goes for all of the categories above, whether it's siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and so on.

EXAMPLES: If you have three older brothers, the oldest would be referred to as "da-ge," the second oldest "er-ge," and the third oldest "san-ge." If you have two younger brothers you (as the oldest) would be number one. Your second-youngest brother would be "er-di," and the youngest of your two younger brothers would be "san-di."

Cultivation and Martial Arts

GENERAL

GONGZI: Young master of an affluent household

-JUN: A suffix meaning "lord."

-QIANBEI: A respectful suffix for someone older, more experienced, and/or more skilled in a particular discipline. Not to be used for blood relatives.

-ZUN: A suffix meaning "esteemed, venerable." More respectful than "-jun."

SECTS

SHIDI: Younger martial brother. For junior male members of one's own sect.

SHIFU: Teacher/master. For one's master in one's own sect. Gender neutral. Mostly interchangeable with Shizun, but has a slightly less formal feel.

SHIJIE: Older martial sister. For senior female members of one's own sect.

SHIMEI: Younger martial sister. For junior female members of one's own sect.

SHINIANG: The wife of a shifu/shizun.

SHISHU: The younger martial sibling of one's master. Can be male or female.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother. For senior male members of one's own sect.

SHIZUN: Honorific address (as opposed to shifu) of one's teacher/master.

Cultivators and Immortals

DAOREN: "Cultivator."

DAOZHANG: A polite address for cultivators. Equivalent to "Mr. Cultivator." Can be used alone as a title or attached to someone's name

EXAMPLE: referring to Xiao Xingchen as "Daozhang" or "Xiao Xingchen-daozhang."

SANREN: "Scattered One." For cultivators/immortals who are not tied to a specific sect.

Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of China. It is a tonal language, so correct pronunciation is vital to being understood! As many readers may not be familiar with the use and sound of tonal marks, below is a very simplified guide on the pronunciation of select character names and terms from MXTX's series to help get you started.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

Series Names

SCUM VILLAIN'S SELF-SAVING SYSTEM (RÉN ZHĀ FAˇN PÀI ZÌ JIÙ XÌ TOˇNG):

en jaa faan pie zzh zioh she tone

GRANDMASTER OF DEMONIC CULTIVATION (MÓ DÀO ZUˇ SHĪ):

mwuh dow zoo shrr

HEAVEN OFFICIAL'S BLESSING (TIĀN GUĀN CÌ FÚ):

tee-yan gwen tsz fuu

Character Names

SHĚN QĪNGQIŪ: Shhen Ching-cheeoh

LUÒ BĪNGHÉ: Loo-uh Bing-huhh

WÈI WÚXIÀN: Way Woo-shee-ahn

LÁN WÀNGJĪ: Lahn Wong-gee

XIÈ LIÁN: Shee-yay Lee-yan

HUĀ CHÉNG: Hoo-wah Cch-yung

XIAˇO-: shee-ow

-ER: ahrr

A-: ah

GŌNGZIˇ: gong-zzh

DÀOZHAˇNG: dow-jon

-JŪN: june

DÌDÌ: dee-dee

GĒGĒ: guh-guh

JIĚJIĚ: gee-ay-gee-ay

MÈIMEI: may-may

-XIÓNG: shong

Terms

DĀNMĚI: dann-may

WUˇXIÁ: woo-sheeah

XIĀNXIÁ: sheeyan-sheeah

QÌ: chee

General Consonants & Vowels

X: similar to English sh (**sh**eep)

Q: similar to English ch (**ch**arm)

C: similar to English ts (pan**ts**)

IU: yoh

UO: wuh

ZHI: jrr

CHI: chrr

SHI: shrr

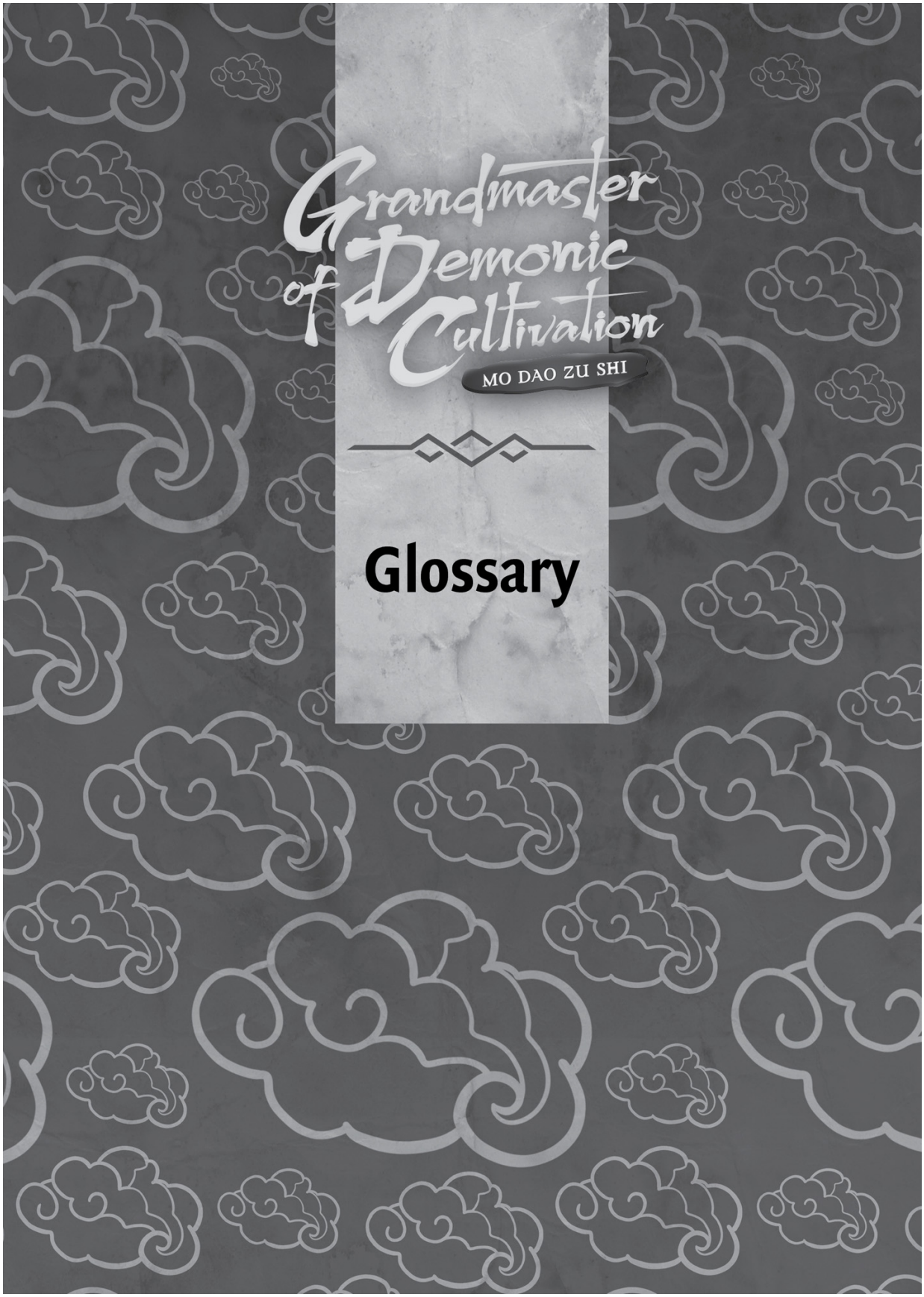
RI: rrr

ZI: zzz

CI: tsz

SI: ssz

U: When u follows a y, j, q, or x, the sound is actually ü, pronounced like eee with your lips rounded like ooo. This applies for yu, yuan, jun, etc.


Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation
MO DAO ZU SHI
Glossary

Glossary

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context to the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel and provide a starting point for learning more about the rich Chinese culture from which these stories were written.

China is home to dozens of cultures, and its history spans thousands of years. The provided definitions are not strictly universal across all these cultural groups, and this simplified overview is meant for new readers unfamiliar with the concepts. This glossary should not be considered a definitive source, especially for more complex ideas.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (耽美 / "indulgence in beauty") is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys' love) genre in Japanese media. The majority of well-known danmei writers are women writing for women, although all genders produce and enjoy the genre.

Wuxia

Wuxia (武侠 / "martial heroes") is one of the oldest Chinese literary genres and consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice. It often follows martial artists, monks, or rogues, who live apart from the ruling government, which is often seen as useless or corrupt. These societal outcasts—both voluntary and not—settle disputes among themselves, adhering to their own moral codes.

Characters in wuxia focus primarily on human concerns, such as political strife between factions and advancing their own personal

sense of justice. True wuxia is low on magical or supernatural elements. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Xianxia

Xianxia (仙侠 / "immortal heroes") is a genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Its characters often strive to become stronger, with the end goal of extending their life span or achieving immortality.

Xianxia heavily features Daoist themes, while cultivation and the pursuit of immortality are both genre requirements. If these are not the story's central focus, it is not xianxia. *The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System*, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, and *Heaven Official's Blessing* are all considered part of both the danmei and xianxia genres.

Webnovels

Webnovels are novels serialized by chapter online, and the websites that host them are considered spaces for indie and amateur writers. Many novels, dramas, comics, and animated shows produced in China are based on popular webnovels.

Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation was first serialized on the website *JJWXC*.

TERMINOLOGY

ARRAY: Area-of-effect magic circles. Anyone within the array falls under the effect of the array's associated spell(s).

ASCENSION: A Daoist concept, ascension refers to the process of a person gaining enlightenment through cultivation, whereupon they shed their mortal form and are removed from the corporeal world. In most xianxia, gods are distinct from immortals in that gods are conceived naturally and born divine, while immortals cannot attain godhood but can achieve great longevity.

BOWING: As is seen in other Asian cultures, standing bows are a traditional greeting and are also used when giving an apology. A deeper bow shows greater respect.

BUDDHISM: The central belief of Buddhism is that life is a cycle of suffering and rebirth, only to be escaped by reaching enlightenment (nirvana). Buddhists believe in karma, that a person's actions will influence their fortune in this life and future lives. The teachings of the Buddha are known as The Middle Way and emphasize a practice that is neither extreme asceticism nor extreme indulgence.

CLANS: Cultivation clans are large blood-related families that share a surname. Clans are led by family elders, and while only family members can be leaders, disciples can join regardless of blood relation. They may eventually take on the family name, depending on whether the family chooses to offer it. This could be accomplished via adoption or marriage. Clans tend to have a signature cultivation or martial art that is passed down through generations along with ancestral magical artifacts and weapons.

Colors

WHITE: Death, mourning, purity. Used in funerals for both the deceased and mourners.

BLACK: Represents the Heavens and the Dao.

RED: Happiness, good luck. Used for weddings.

YELLOW/GOLD: Wealth and prosperity, and often reserved for the emperor.

BLUE/GREEN (CYAN): Health, prosperity, and harmony.

PURPLE: Divinity and immortality, often associated with nobility.

CONFUCIANISM: Confucianism is a philosophy based on the teachings of Confucius. Its influence on all aspects of Chinese culture is incalculable. Confucius placed heavy importance on respect for one's elders and family, a concept broadly known as *xiao* (孝 / "filial piety"). The family structure is used in other contexts to urge similar behaviors, such as respect of a student towards a teacher, or people of a country towards their ruler.

CORES/GOLDEN CORES: The formation of a jindan (金丹 / "golden core") is a key step in any cultivator's journey to immortality. The Golden Core forms within the lower *dantian*, becoming an internal source of power for the cultivator. Golden Core formation is only accomplished after a great deal of intense training and qi cultivation.

Cultivators can detonate their Golden Core as a last-ditch move to take out a dangerous opponent, but this almost always kills the cultivator. A core's destruction or removal is permanent. In almost all instances, it cannot be re-cultivated. Its destruction also prevents the individual from ever being able to process or cultivate qi normally again.

COURTESY NAMES: A courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. (See Name Guide for more information.)

CULTIVATORS/CULTIVATION: Cultivators are practitioners of spirituality and martial artists who seek to gain understanding of the will of the universe while also attaining personal strength and expanding their life span.

Cultivation is a long process marked by "stages." There are traditionally nine stages, but this is often simplified in fiction. Some common stages are noted below, though exact definitions of each stage may depend on the setting.

- ◇ Qi Condensation/Qi Refining (凝气/练气)
- ◇ Foundation Establishment (筑基)
- ◇ Core Formation/Golden Core (结丹/金丹)
- ◇ Nascent Soul (元婴)
- ◇ Deity Transformation (化神)
- ◇ Great Ascension (大乘)
- ◇ Heavenly Tribulation (渡劫)

CULTIVATION MANUAL: Cultivation manuals and sutras are common plot devices in xianxia/wuxia novels. They provide detailed instructions on a secret/advanced training technique, and are sought out by those who wish to advance their cultivation levels.

CURRENCY: The currency system during most dynasties was based on the exchange of silver and gold coinage. Weight was also used to measure denominations of money. An example is something being marked with a price of "one *liang* of silver."

CUT-SLEEVE: A term for a gay man. Comes from a tale about an emperor's love for, and relationship with, a male politician. The emperor was called to the morning assembly, but his lover was asleep on his sleeve. Rather than wake him, the emperor cut off his sleeve.

DANTIAN: *Dantian* (丹田 / "cinnabar field") refers to three regions in the body where qi is concentrated and refined. The Lower is located three finger widths below and two finger widths behind the navel. This is where a cultivator's golden core would be formed and is where the qi metabolism process begins and progresses upward. The Middle is located at the center of the chest, at level with the heart, while the Upper is located on the forehead, between the eyebrows.

DAOISM: Daoism is the philosophy of the *Dao* (道 / "the way") Following the Dao involves coming into harmony with the natural order of the universe, which makes someone a "true human," safe from external harm and able to affect the world without intentional action. Cultivation is a concept based on Daoist beliefs.

DEMONS: A race of immensely powerful and innately supernatural beings. They are almost always aligned with evil. Evil-aligned cultivators who seek power are said to follow the demonic cultivation path.

DISCIPLES: Clan and sect juniors are known as disciples. Disciples live on sect grounds and have a strict hierarchy based on skill and seniority. They are divided into Core, Inner, and Outer rankings, with Core being the highest. Higher-ranked disciples get better lodging and other resources.

For non-clan members, when formally joining a sect as a disciple, the sect becomes like the disciple's new family: teachers are parents and peers are siblings. Because of this, a betrayal or abandonment of one's sect is considered a deep transgression of Confucian values of filial piety. This is also the origin of many of the honorifics and titles used for martial arts.

DIZI: A flute held horizontally. They are considered an instrument for commoners, as they are easy to craft from bamboo or wood.

FACE: *Mianzi* (面子), generally translated as "face," is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person's reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, "having face" refers to having a good reputation, and "losing face" refers to having one's reputation hurt. Meanwhile, "giving face" means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while "not wanting face" implies that a person is acting so poorly/shamelessly that they clearly don't care about their reputation at all. "Thin face" refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, "thick face" refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

FAIRY/XIANZI: A term commonly used in novels to describe a woman possessing ethereal, heavenly beauty. *Xianzi* is the female counterpart to *xianren* ("immortal"), and is also used to describe celestials that have descended from heaven.

FENG SHUI: *Feng shui* (風水 / "wind-water") is a Daoist practice centered around the philosophy of achieving spiritual accord between people, objects, and the universe at large. Practitioners usually focus on positioning and orientation, believing this can

optimize the flow of qi in their environment. Having good feng shui means being in harmony with the natural order.

THE FIVE ELEMENTS: Also known as the *wuxing* (五行 / "Five Phases"). Rather than Western concepts of elemental magic, Chinese phases are more commonly used to describe the interactions and relationships between things. The phases can both beget and overcome each other.

Wood (木 / mu)

Fire (火 / huo)

Earth (土 / tu)

Metal (金 / jin)

Water (水 / shui)

Flower Symbolism

LOTUS: Associated with Buddhism. It rises untainted from the muddy waters it grows in, and thus symbolizes ultimate purity of the heart and mind.

PEONY: Symbolizes wealth and power. Was considered the "emperor" of flowers. Sparks Amidst Snow, the signature flower of the Jin Clan of Lanling in Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation, is based on the real-life Paeonia suffruticosa cultivar (金星雪浪).

PINE (TREE): A symbol of evergreen sentiment / everlasting affection.

WILLOW (TREE): A symbol of lasting affection and friendship. Also a symbol of farewell and can mean "urging someone to stay."

FUNERALS: Chinese funerals last anywhere from three to seven days, and the mourning period lasts for forty-nine days. A Buddhist or Daoist ceremony is held every seventh day during these seven

weeks. A vigil is held during the first week and ends when the body is interred. During this period, a family member (usually the eldest son or a spouse) needs to remain with the deceased's body for companionship. This duty is usually shared in shifts.

During the funeral ceremony, mourners can present the deceased with offerings of food, incense, and joss paper. If deceased ancestors have no patrilineal descendants to give them offerings, they may starve in the afterlife and become hungry ghosts. Wiping out a whole family is punishment for more than just the living.

After the funeral, the coffin is nailed shut and sealed with paper talismans to protect the body from evil spirits. The deceased is transported in a procession to their final resting place, often accompanied by loud music to scare off evil spirits. Cemeteries are usually on hillsides; the higher a grave is located, the better the feng shui. The traditional mourning color is white.

Keeping the corpse intact is a demonstration of respect for the dead. Dismemberment and cremation with no proper burial is a sign of profound disrespect and hatred and is mostly reserved for criminals.

GHOST: Ghosts (鬼) are the restless spirits of deceased sentient creatures. Ghosts produce yin energy and crave yang energy. They come in a variety of types: they can be malevolent or helpful, can retain their former personalities or be fully mindless, and can actively try to interact with the living world to achieve a goal or be little more than a remnant shadow of their former lives.

GOLDEN CROW: A Golden Crow (金乌)—also known as Three-legged Crow (三足乌)—is a tripedal crow that is often used to represent the sun. A myth explains that there were once ten of these crows, which nested in the Valley of the Sun and came out one at a time to cross the sky. One day they all came out at once and began to cause chaos, causing the world to burn. The divine

archer Houyi shot down nine of the ten crows to save humanity. This myth is directly referenced in *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* as the meaning behind the name of the Sunshot Campaign.

GUQIN: A seven-stringed zither, played by plucking with the fingers. Sometimes called a qin. It is fairly large and is meant to be laid flat on a surface or on one's lap while playing.

HAND GESTURES: The *baoquan* (抱拳 / "hold fist") is a martial arts salute where one places their closed right fist against their open left palm. The *gongshou* (拱手 / "arch hand") is a more generic salute not specific to martial artists, where one drapes their open left palm over their closed right fist. The orientation of both of these salutes is reversed for women. During funerals, the closed hand in both salutes switches, where men will use their left fist and women their right.

HAND SEALS: Refers to various hand and finger gestures used by cultivators to cast spells, or used while meditating. A cultivator may be able to control their sword remotely with a hand seal.

IMMORTAL-BINDING ROPES OR CABLES: Ropes, nets, and other restraints enchanted to withstand the power of an immortal or god. They can only be cut by high-powered spiritual items or weapons and often limit the abilities of those trapped by them.

INCENSE TIME: A common way to tell time in ancient China, referring to how long it takes for a single incense stick to burn. Standardized incense sticks were manufactured and calibrated for specific time measurements: a half hour, an hour, a day, etc. These were available to people of all social classes. When referenced in

Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation, a single incense time is usually about thirty minutes.

INEDIA: A common ability that allows an immortal to survive without mortal food or sleep by sustaining themselves on purer forms of energy based on Daoist fasting. Depending on the setting, immortals who have achieved inedia may be unable to tolerate mortal food, or they may be able to choose to eat when desired.

JADE: Jade is a culturally and spiritually important mineral in China. Its durability, beauty, and the ease with which it can be utilized for crafting both decorative and functional pieces alike has made it widely beloved since ancient times. The word might cause Westerners to think of green jade (the mineral jadeite), but Chinese texts are often referring to white jade (the mineral nephrite). This is the color referenced when a person's skin is described as "the color of jade."

JOSS PAPER: Also referred to as ghost paper, joss paper is a form of paper crafting used to make offerings to the deceased. The paper can be folded into various shapes and is burned as an offering, allowing the deceased person to utilize the gift the paper represents in the realm of the dead. Common gifts include paper money, houses, clothing, toiletries, and dolls to act as the deceased's servants.

NEW BABY: New baby traditions: A mother is confined to the house to recuperate for the first thirty days after giving birth. This postpartum confinement period is known as zuoyuezi (坐月子 / "sitting the month"). During this month, new mothers are tended to by their mother-in-law (or their own mother). Visitors, sometimes even immediate family members, are barred from entry until the period is over.

The conclusion of the thirty days is known as manyue (满月 / "full month") or miyue (弥月 / "complete month"). The occasion of the baby's birth can be celebrated at this time, and it is known as zuomanyue (做满月/满月酒 / "doing the full month" or "full month banquet"), or miyuezhixi (弥月之喜 / "complete month bash"). This is when the baby is formally inducted into the family and presented to the ancestors. During the full month celebration, family and friends are invited to a banquet and to witness the zhuazhou (抓周) tradition, a ceremony in which various symbolic items are placed in front of the baby. Whichever item the baby selects first is said to predict their future fortunes. (For example, picking up a pen indicates they will be a scholar, picking up an abacus means they will be successful in business, etc.)

The Chinese calendar uses the Tian Gan Di Zhi (Heavenly Stems, Earthly Branches) system to mark the years. There are ten heavenly stems and twelve earthly branches, each represented by a written character. The set of characters associated with the year/month/date/time of a person's birth is known as 生辰八字, or "eight characters of birth date/time."

Numbers

TWO: Two (二 / "er") is considered a good number and is referenced in the common idiom "good things come in pairs." It is common practice to repeat characters in pairs for added effect.

THREE: Three (三 / "san") sounds like *sheng* (生 / "living") and also like san (散 / "separation").

FOUR: Four (四 / "si") sounds like *si* (死 / "death"). A very unlucky number.

SEVEN: Seven (七 / "qi") sounds like *qi* (齊 / "together"), making it a good number for love-related things. However, it also sounds like *qi* (欺 / "deception").

EIGHT: Eight (八 / "ba") sounds like *fa* (發 / "prosperity"), causing it to be considered a very lucky number.

NINE: Nine (九 / "jiu") is associated with matters surrounding the Emperor and Heaven, and is as such considered an auspicious number.

MXTX's work has subtle numerical theming around its love interests. In *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, her second book, Lan Wangji is frequently called Lan-er-gege ("second brother Lan") as a nickname by Wei Wuxian. In her third book, *Heaven Official's Blessing*, Hua Cheng is the third son of his family and gives the name San Lang ("third youth") when Xie Lian asks what to call him.

PAPER EFFIGIES: *Zhizha* (纸扎) is a form of Daoist paper craft. Zhizha effigies can be used in place of living sacrifices to one's ancestors in the afterlife, or to gods. Joss paper can be considered a form of zhizha specifically for the deceased, though unlike zhizha, it is not specifically Daoist in nature.

PILLS AND ELIXIRS: Magic medicines that can heal wounds, improve cultivation, extend life, etc. In Chinese culture, these things are usually delivered in pill form. These pills are created in special kilns.

PRIMORDIAL SPIRIT: The essence of one's existence beyond the physical. The body perishes, the soul enters the karmic wheel, but the spirit that makes one unique is eternal.

QI: *Qi* (气) is the energy in all living things. There is both righteous qi and evil or poisonous qi.

Cultivators strive to cultivate qi by absorbing it from the natural world and refining it within themselves to improve their cultivation

base. A cultivation base refers to the amount of qi a cultivator possesses or is able to possess. In xianxia, natural locations such as caves, mountains, or other secluded places with beautiful scenery are often rich in qi, and practicing there can allow a cultivator to make rapid progress in their cultivation.

Cultivators and other qi manipulators can utilize their life force in a variety of ways, including imbuing objects with it to transform them into lethal weapons or sending out blasts of energy to do powerful damage. Cultivators also refine their senses beyond normal human levels. For instance, they may cast out their spiritual sense to gain total awareness of everything in a region around them or to feel for potential danger.

QI CIRCULATION: The metabolic cycle of qi in the body, where it flows from the dantian to the meridians and back. This cycle purifies and refines qi, and good circulation is essential to cultivation. In xianxia, qi can be transferred from one person to another through physical contact and can heal someone who is wounded if the donor is trained in the art.

QI DEVIATION: A qi deviation (走火入魔 / "to catch fire and enter demonhood") occurs when one's cultivation base becomes unstable. Common causes include an unstable emotional state, practicing cultivation methods incorrectly, reckless use of forbidden or high-level arts, or succumbing to the influence of demons and devils.

Symptoms of qi deviation in fiction include panic, paranoia, sensory hallucinations, and death, whether by the qi deviation itself causing irreparable damage to the body or as a result of its symptoms such as leaping to one's death to escape a hallucination. Common treatments of qi deviation in fiction include relaxation (voluntary or forced by an external party), massage, meditation, or qi transfer from another individual.

QIANKUN: (乾坤 / "universe") Common tools used in fantasy novels. The primary function of these magical items is to provide unlimited storage space. Examples include pouches, the sleeve of a robe, magical jewelry, a weapon, and more.

SECT: A cultivation sect is an organization of individuals united by their dedication to the practice of a particular method of cultivation or martial arts. A sect may have a signature style. Sects are led by a single leader, who is supported by senior sect members. They are not necessarily related by blood.

SEVEN APERTURES/QIQIAO: (七窍) The seven facial apertures: the two eyes, nose, mouth, tongue, and two ears. The essential qi of vital organs are said to connect to the seven apertures, and illness in the vital organs may cause symptoms there. People who are ill or seriously injured may be "bleeding from the seven apertures."

SHICHEN: Days were split into twelve intervals of two hours apiece called *shichen* (时辰 / "time"). Each of these shichen has an associated term. Pre-Han dynasty used semi-descriptive terms, but in Post-Han dynasty, the shichen were renamed to correspond to the twelve zodiac animals.

ZI, MIDNIGHT: 11pm - 1am

CHOU: 1am - 3am

YIN: 3am - 5am

MAO, SUNRISE: 5am - 7am

CHEN: 7am - 9am

SI: 9am - 11am

WU, NOON: 11am - 1pm

WEI: 1pm - 3pm

SHEN: 3pm - 5pm

YOU, SUNSET: 5pm - 7pm

XU, DUSK: 7pm - 9pm

HAI: 9pm - 11pm

SHIDI, SHIXIONG, SHIZUN, ETC.: Chinese titles and terms used to indicate a person's role or rank in relation to the speaker. Because of the robust nature of this naming system, and a lack of nuance in translating many to English, the original titles have been maintained. (See Name Guide for more information.)

THE SIX ARTS: Six disciplines that any well-bred gentleman in Ancient China was expected to be learned in. The Six Arts were: Rites, Music, Archery, Chariotry or Equestrianism, Calligraphy, and Mathematics.

SPIRIT-ATTRACTION FLAG: A banner or flag intended to guide spirits. Can be hung from a building or tree to mark a location or carried around on a staff.

SWORDS: A cultivator's sword is an important part of their cultivation practice. In many instances, swords are spiritually bound to their owner and may have been bestowed to them by their master, a family member, or obtained through a ritual. Cultivators in fiction are able to use their swords as transportation by standing atop the flat of the blade and riding it as it flies through the air. Skilled cultivators can summon their swords to fly into their hand, command the sword to fight on its own, or release energy attacks from the edge of the blade.

SWORD GLARE: *Jianguang* (剑光 / "sword light"), an energy attack released from a sword's edge.

SWORN BROTHERS/SISTERS/FAMILIES: In China, sworn brotherhood describes a binding social pact made by two or more unrelated individuals. Such a pact can be entered into for social, political, and/or personal reasons. It was most common among men but was not unheard of among women or between people of different genders.

The participants treat members of each other's families as their own and assist them in the ways an extended family would: providing mutual support and aid, support in political alliances, etc. Sworn siblings will refer to themselves as brother or sister, but this is not to be confused with familial relations like blood siblings or adoption. It is sometimes used in Chinese media, particularly danmei, to imply romantic relationships that could otherwise be prone to censorship.

TALISMANS: Strips of paper with incantations written on them, often done so with cinnabar ink or blood. They can serve as seals or be used as one-time spells.

TIGER TALLY: A *hufu* (虎符 / "tiger tally"), was used by Ancient Chinese emperors to signal their approval to dispatch troops in battle. A hufu was in two parts: one in the possession of the emperor, and the other in the possession of a general in the field. To signal approval, the emperor would send his half of the hufu to the general. If the two sides matched, troops would advance.

WEDDING TRADITIONS (BOWING): During a wedding ceremony, the couple must bow three times: one bow to worship the heavens

and earth, one bow to respect their parents, and one bow to respect each other.

WHISK: A whisk held by a cultivator is not a baking tool, but a Daoist symbol and martial arts weapon. Usually made of horsehair bound to a wooden stick, the whisk is based off a tool used to brush away flies without killing them, and is symbolically meant for wandering Daoist monks to brush away thoughts that would lure them back to secular life. Wudang Daoist Monks created a fighting style based on wielding it as a weapon.

YAO: Animals, plants, or objects that have gained spiritual consciousness due to prolonged absorption of qi. Especially high-level or long-lived yao are able to take on a human form. This concept is comparable to Japanese yokai, which is a loanword from the Chinese yao. Yao are not evil by nature but often come into conflict with humans for various reasons, one being that the cores they develop can be harvested by human cultivators to increase their own abilities.

YIN ENERGY AND YANG ENERGY: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy can do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever they lack.

Footnotes

1. “Si-shu” / “Uncle Number Four” is an address as well as a name. It is common to use numbers when addressing relatives by title.

2. The Chinese saying “To die with [one’s] eyes closed” is similar in meaning to the English phrase “to rest in peace.”

3. A common saying which dates back to the sixteenth century Ming Dynasty. Originated from the highly influential fantasy novel Investiture of the Gods.

4. A compliment usually reserved for women which indicates they are wellrounded in household affairs.

5. Referencing a Han Chinese naming convention. In a given clan, members of the same genera-tion share the same first character in their given name.

6. During a wedding ceremony, the couple must bow three times: one bow to worship the heavens and earth, one bow to respect their parents, and one bow to respect each other.

7. Peach blossoms are a common symbol of love in Chinese art and literature, and are used to symbolize affairs and relationships.

About the Author

"A young superstitious girl,

renowned poster of memes;

a gourmet world goof, who takes photos with shaky hands;

and types cursedly slow, finishing stories depending on the mood.

...All lies.

I actually enjoy a refreshing cup of tea in the afternoon, staring into the far-off distance as I open my beloved notebook to write poetry.

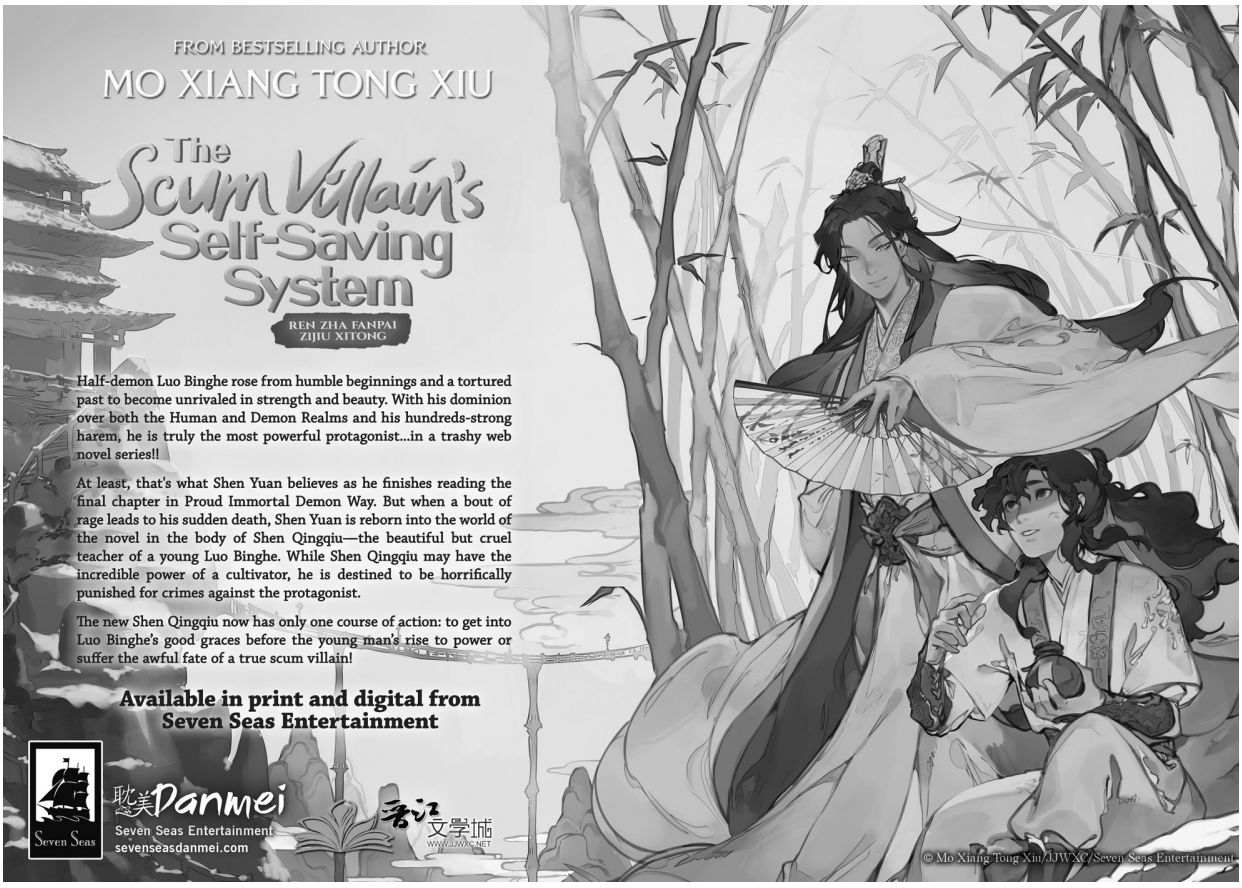
...No, no, no, that's even more of a lie.

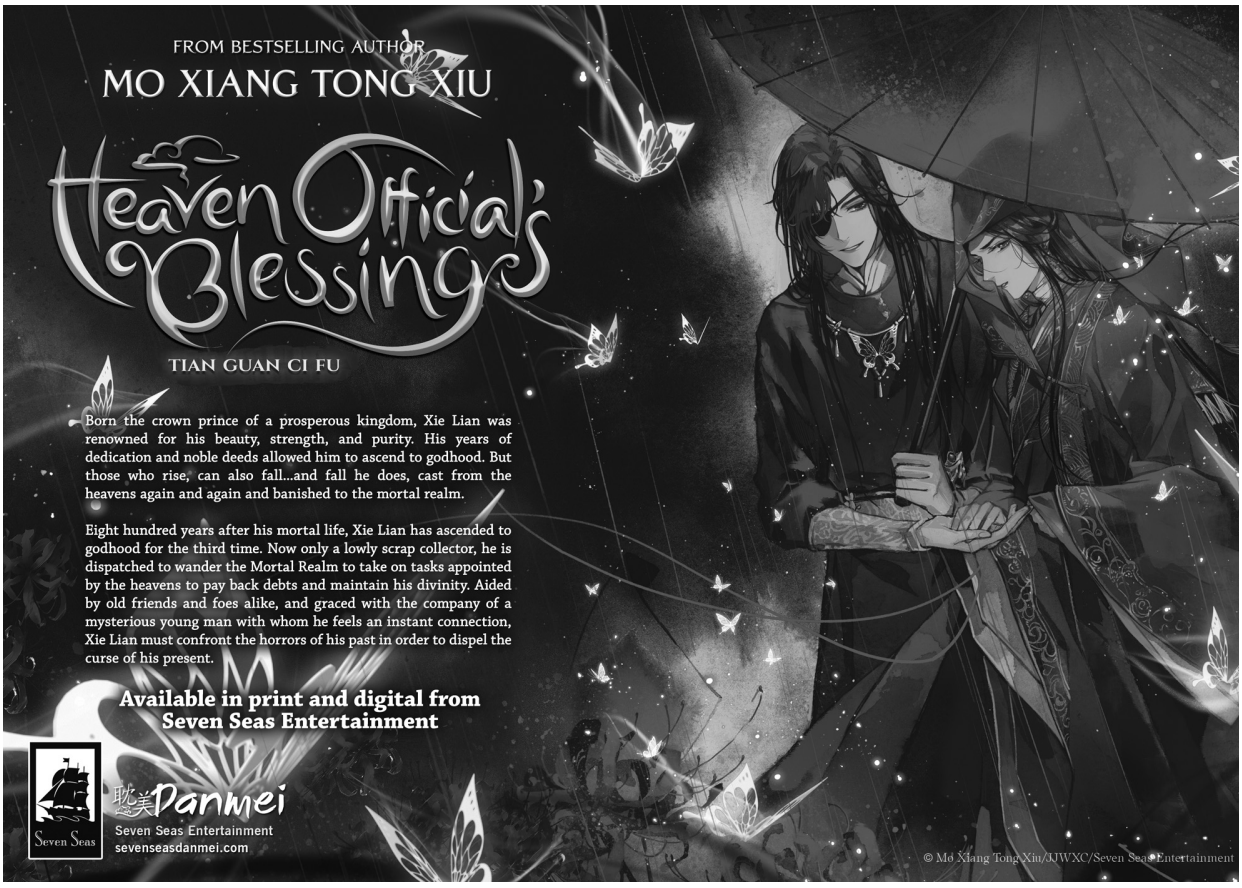
All right, actually, I'm just someone

who writes.

Yep."

Mo Xiang Tong Xiu (MXTX) is a globally renowned and *New York Times* bestselling author whose works are often cited as the most well-known of the modern danmei genre. Originally self-published via the novel serialization website, JJWXC, her current titles include *The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System, Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation,* and *Heaven Official's Blessing.* Her series have received multiple adaptations and have been published in numerous languages around the world.


FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MO XIANG TONG XIU
Heaven Official's Blessings
TIAN GUAN CI FU
Born the crown prince of a prosperous kingdom, Xie Lian was renowned for his beauty, strength, and purity. His years of dedication and noble deeds allowed him to ascend to godhood. But those who rise, can also fall...and fall he does, cast from the heavens again and again and banished to the mortal realm.
Eight hundred years after his mortal life, Xie Lian has ascended to godhood for the third time. Now only a lowly scrap collector, he is dispatched to wander the Mortal Realm to take on tasks appointed by the heavens to pay back debts and maintain his divinity. Aided by old friends and foes alike, and graced with the company of a mysterious young man with whom he feels an instant connection, Xie Lian must confront the horrors of his past in order to dispel the curse of his present.
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The Long Way Home
History stands poised to repeat itself as Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji are besieged by walking corpses atop the Burial Mounds. It is here fate offers them a second chance to protect their loved ones and unmask the true instigator of this grisly onslaught. As shocking revelations shake the cultivation world to its very core, the unlikely couple becomes preoccupied with other matters—like an evening of drunken impulse that may push their budding relationship into bold new territory.
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